

“IT IS NOT HR TOOL, NOT AT ALL..AND THERE’S NO WAY  
WE WANT TO CALL IT HR TOOL, BECAUSE WE WANT LINE  
MANAGERS TO TAKE OWNERSHIP OVER IT”

Role theoretical approach to devolution of HR tasks in Finnish, white-  
collar expert work

Master’s Thesis  
Miikka Kareinen  
Aalto University School of Business  
Management and International Business  
Spring 2020

---

**Author** Miikka Kareinen

---

**Title of thesis** "It is not HR tool, not at all.. and there's no way we want to call it HR tool, because we want line managers to take ownership over it"- Role theoretical approach to devolution of HR tasks in Finnish, white-collar expert work

---

**Degree** MScBA

---

**Degree programme** Management and International Business

---

**Thesis advisor(s)** Hertta Vuorenmaa

---

**Year of approval** 2020

---

**Number of pages** 63

---

**Language** English

---

### **Abstract**

The way work is conducted, is changing. Expert, white-collar workers are able to work independent of place and time. This development in digital era challenges the current leadership requirements. At the same time, HR tasks are shifting to be done by company line managers. This development is called HRM devolution. The purpose of this study is to broaden knowledge on expectations company line managers face in their position. Focus is on HR managers' expectations on line managers.

This study is carried out by semi-structured interviews. The data comprises of 13 interviews with Finnish HR managers. The focus is on expectations of line managers' role in HR tasks. All the interviewees have lengthy track-record in their field, and their position allows a good window to peak in to leadership requirements in digital era. One of the main themes in this thesis is to shed light on how digital solutions and technology shape how people act and relate to each other.

The key findings from this thesis include line managers' role as remote work policy maker, holding main responsibility in performance appraisal as well as digital platforms speeding up HR devolution. HR managers perceived that remote work policy making is based on team or unit-level fit. Loose company-level guidelines might exist, but otherwise HR seemed to offer little support for line managers in remote work issue. Trust was seen as a key factor in building a functional remote work practise. Interviewed HR managers emphasized that building work culture where trust is cherished is line managers' responsibility. According to findings, remote work creates a double-burden for line managers. Line managers should be able to lead from distance effectively, while offering subordinates a lot of individual freedom to decide how to conduct work.

The results further suggest that line managers need to learn skills in goal setting and appraisal of performance. Staying on track of current work content and work load of subordinate becomes crucial. Work well-being was discussed as one theme, as line managers were called to keep regular touch with employees as well as making sure they don't burn out.

Finally, the findings indicate that new digital solutions such as HR platform Workday, might speed up the devolution of HR tasks in near future. These platforms allow to manage and approve data about employees in real-time with the help of smart, cloud-based technology. Thus, results show that centralizing HR tasks to one platform makes some HR admin tasks to vanish and to become responsibilities of line managers.

---

**Keywords** HRM devolution, line manager, expectations, digital era, role theory

---

---

**Tekijä** Miikka Kareinen

---

**Työn nimi** “Ei se ole HR-työkalu ollenkaan.. Ja me ei missään tapauksessa kutsuta sitä HR-työkaluksi, koska me halutaan että nimenomaan esimiehet ottaa omistajuuden siitä” - Rooliteoreettinen näkökulma HR-tehtävien siirtymiseen esimiehille asiantuntijatehtävissä Suomessa

---

**Tutkinto** Kauppatieteiden maisteri

---

**Koulutusohjelma** Johtamisen ja kansainvälisen liiketoiminnan laitos

---

**Työn ohjaaja(t)** Hertta Vuorenmaa

---

**Hyväksymisvuosi** 2020

**Sivumäärä** 63

**Kieli** Englanti

---

## Tiivistelmä

Työn tekeminen muuttuu. Asiantuntijat ovat entistä useammin vapaita työskentelemään ajasta, ja paikasta riippumatta. Tämä digitaalisen ajan kehitys haastaa nykyiset vaatimukset johtajuudelle. Samaan aikaan, HR-tehtävät ovat siirtymässä yrityksissä esimiesten tehtäväksi. Tästä kehityksestä voidaan käyttää nimitystä ”Henkilöstöjohtamisen hajautuminen”. Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on edistää tietämystä vaatimuksista, joita esimiehet työssään kohtaavat. Tarkastelussa ovat HR johtajien odotukset esimiestyötä kohtaan.

Tutkimus on toteutettu käyttäen puolistrukturoituja haastatteluita. Aineisto koostuu 13 suomalaisen HR johtajan haastattelusta. Haastatellut HR johtajat omaavat pitkän kokemuksen HR-tehtävistä, ja asema yrityksen johdossa antaa hyvän näkymän johtamisvaatimuksille digitaalisena aikana. Yksi tutkimuksen keskeisistä teemoista on valottaa, kuinka teknologia ja digitaaliset alustat vaikuttavat ihmisten vuorovaikutukseen,

Keskeisimmät löydökset tutkimuksesta olivat esimiehen rooli etätyökäytännön määrittäjänä, päävastuu suorituksen arvioinnissa sekä digitaalisten alustojen vaikutus esimiesten HR-tehtäviä lisäävänä elementtinä. HR-johtajat kokivat etätyökäytännön määrittämisessä keskeiseksi sen toimivuuden tiimi- tai yksikkötasolla. Yrityksellä saattoi olla yleistason ohjeistus etätyöhön, muuten HR tuki esimiehille oli vähäistä. Luottamuksen merkitys korostui sujuvan etätyökäytännön rakentajana. Haastatellut HR-johtajat korostivat esimiesten roolia luottamukseen perustuvan työkuluttuurin rakentamisessa. Tutkimuksen mukaan etätyö tuo esimiehille kaksitasoisen vastuun. Esimiesten olisi kyettävä johtamaan tehokkaasti etänä, ja samanaikaisesti tarjottava paljon yksilönvapautta työn järjestämisen suhteen alaisilleen.

Tulokset indikoivat myös, että esimiesten olisi kyettävä asettamaan tavoitteita ja arvioimaan suoritusta. Kyky hallita alaisen työn sisältöä ja työnkuormaa on keskeisessä osassa. Työhyvinvointi nousi esiin haastatteluista, esimiesten odotettiin pitävän säännöllistä yhteyttä tiimin jäseniin varmistaakseen alaisten työuupumuksen välttämisen.

Lopuksi, tulokset osoittavat että uudet digitaaliset alustat, kuten HR-järjestelmä Workday, saattavat kiihdyttää HR-tehtävien siirtymistä esimiehille lähitulevaisuudessa. Näiden järjestelmien ansiosta alaisten asioiden hyväksyminen ja seuraaminen muuttuu reaali-aikaiseksi. HR tehtävien keskittäminen digitaaliseen alustaan vähentää hallinnollisia HR tehtäviä, siirtäen ne esimiesten vastuulle.

---

**Avainsanat** Henkilöstöjohtamisen hajautuminen, esimies, odotukset, digitaalinen aikakausi, rooliteoria

---

## Table of Contents

1.	Introduction.....	1
1.1	Literature and research gap .....	3
1.2	Research context and research questions .....	5
2.	Literature Review .....	7
2.1	Digitalisation: effect on leadership and way of working.....	7
2.2	Technology and digitalization in organization and management research.....	11
2.3	HRM Devolution.....	15
2.3.1	Organisational success factors of HR devolvment .....	16
2.3.2	Role theoretical approach .....	18
2.3.3	HR's supportive role .....	20
2.3.4	Prominent research avenues: Devolved HR practices and digitality in devolvment .....	22
2.4	Theoretical framework: Role theory .....	24
3.	Methodology .....	28
3.1	Method: Semi-structured interview study .....	29
3.2	Research design.....	30
3.3	Being part of the research project.....	31
3.4	Data analysis.....	32
3.5	Ethical considerations of the thesis .....	36
4.	Findings.....	38
4.1	Line managers' role in HR tasks .....	39
4.1.1	Remote work policy maker .....	39
4.1.2	In charge of goal setting and rewarding.....	43
4.2	Relationship between HR and line managers.....	46
4.2.1	Virtual communication and digital platforms .....	47
4.3	Summary of the findings section.....	51
5.	Conclusions .....	53
5.1	Limitations and further research avenues.....	57
6.	References .....	58

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Research Gap.....	4
Figure 2: From initial codes to final themes.....	36

## 1. Introduction

During last decade or so, digital solutions have given expert workers a lot of room to decide where, when and how they conduct their work. In other words, work disconnects from time, place and employment (Sumelius, et al., forthcoming). First, expert workers are able to conduct their work outside regulated office hours with the help of mobile technology. Secondly, mobile technologies allow working independent of physical setting. The last disconnection, of work and employment, changes traditional job contracts towards entrepreneurial way of working.

This thesis aims to shed light on the leadership requirements for line managers in Finnish, white-collar expert work context. This is done by inquiring the expectations HR managers have for line managers. The perspective is HRM devolution – how HR tasks conducted previously by centralized HR unit have gradually shifted to be done by line managers. This context includes bringing technology in as key determinant shaping the way people act and relate to each other (e.g. Barley, 2015; Zammuto, et al., 2007; Isari, Bissola and Imperatori. 2019, 46). First, this thesis concentrates on line managers role as remote work policy maker as well as having main responsibility in performance appraisal. The thesis suggests that line managers have to build remote work policy which has a team or unit-level fit. At the same time, the findings show limited support from HR in remote work policy making. Likewise, HR managers expect line managers to handle leading from the distance well. Furthermore, this study proposes that line managers' ability to track workload of subordinates, to set clear goals as well as training line managers in new performance appraisal systems, is crucial. Finally, the role of digital platforms adding to line managers HR task responsibilities, is discussed.

These changing leadership requirements have been inquired recently. Schwarzmüller, Brosi, Duman and Welp (2018) bring up intercultural & language competencies, leading from distance, managing uncertainty and complexity, ability to handle and initiate change (relational skills), need for IT competencies and need for life-long learning. Cascio and Montealegre (2016, 356) call for leaders' ability to tolerate ambiguity, understanding the big picture by integrating different types of information and skill to motivate employees to move to same direction.

The demands for managers in digital era have been inquired also in another research stream, called HRM devolution. Referring to “*transfer of responsibilities from HR specialists working in and identified with a centralized HR unit to line managers in other units*” (Kulik and Perry, 2008, 545), the area focuses on the growing responsibility of company line managers. This development has been ongoing for already couple of decades (Larsen and Brewster, 2003), and line managers have been recognized as key players in implementing HR practices (see e.g. Evans, 2015; Björkman, et al., 2011).

There are many, often layered views how to define line manager or middle manager. Uytendaele (1972, cited in Dutton and Ashford, 1993, 398) define middle managers as managers “*who operate at the intermediate level of the corporate hierarchy*”. A distinction has been made between line-managers, middle managers and specifically front-line managers (e.g. Evans, 2017; Hales, 2005). This means that front-line managers can be separated from line managers or middle managers by holding a “front line” position being first managerial role in organisational hierarchy, compared to line managers or middle managers who operate in more intermediary position in organisation hierarchy (Evans, 2017, 3129). In this thesis, a line manager refers to a person who has non-managerial employees (Evans, 2017, 3129) to manage and at least one supervisory layer above him.

The theoretical framework of the thesis is based on role theory. In initial coding, theory on *nonrelational* and *relational* role aspects, was utilized (Nadel, 1957). Nonrelationality can be defined as actions that do not require a partner to be conducted successfully. Thus, these actions do not affect interaction or dependencies between people (Barley, 1990, 67). On the other hand, relational role aspects refer to alterations in tasks that affect social structure by “*altering or expanding role sets, shifting dependencies, or changing the frequency and content of encounters*” (Barley and Kunda, 2001, 89).

In analysis and generating findings, Biddle’s (1986) framework of role expectations is utilized. These expectations may manifest in form of beliefs, norms and preferences (Ibid.,). He adds that each of these may or may not be shared by other people in the same context, can affect behaviour and may all be involved in generating a role. In this thesis, aspiration is to capture these norms, preferences and beliefs of study participants when trying to explain what, why and how they expect something from line managers in their organisations.

My data consists of 13 semi-structured interviews with Finnish HR managers. These interviews have been conducted as part of research project “Brave New HR” by two Post-doc researchers from Aalto University and Hanken School of Economics. My participation in the research project is further explicated in the methodology section.

## 1.1 Literature and research gap

This thesis leans on scholarly discussions of digitalization and leadership, technology and organisations as well as HRM devolution. In technology and organisation literature, Orlikowski (2009, 135) refers to sociomateriality when speaking of human action entangling with material aspects of life, e.g. technology. In digitalisation and leadership, there has been studies focusing on what leadership requirements digitalisation brings (Schwarzmüller, et al., 2018; Cortellazzo, et al., 2019). On the other hand, HRM devolution studies have focused on successful contingencies in devolution, on role conflict and on the role HR plays in successful devolution. When drawing on these discussions, it is notable that only limited amount of research about the role of new smart-based technologies in devolution, exists (see e.g. Isari, et al., 2019). Furthermore, only few studies have inquired single HR practices from devolution perspective (Intindola, et al., 2017; Walker and Hamilton, 2011; Tyskbo, 2020).

The current organisational literature has been criticised to lack the role of technology in organizing (Zammuto, et al., 2007; Orlikowski and Scott, 2008). These two review papers concluded that less than 5% percent of organizational inquiry articles from mid 90s dealt with technology’s impact on organization. Similarly, Cortellazzo, Bruni and Zampieri (2019) found that only 54 articles about leadership and its’ linkage to digitalization had been conducted in the areas of management, psychology and social sciences (Cortellazzo, et al., 2019, 3). Furthermore, 60 percent of these articles were published after 2014 (Ibid.,). This implies that only lately, the linkage of digitalization and leadership has started to grow attention among scholars.

The most recent HRM devolution literature suggests that devolvment of HR tasks is speeding up because digital tools enable supervisors to communicate to subordinates directly and in real time (Isari, et al., 2019; Intindola, et al., 2017). Digitalisation of work may enable organisations to be more efficient when ICT makes possible “*new ways of control, coordination and*



*collaboration on activities more readily*” (Cascio and Montealegre, 2016, 351). To date, HRM devolution literature area is known e.g. by studies on role stress and role ambiguity (e.g. Gilbert, De Winne and Sels, 2011), how the perceptions of devolvment differ between line managers and HR professionals (e.g. Op de Beeck, Wynen and Hondeghem,, 2016), what are the organisational factors influencing devolvment success (e.g. Sikora and Ferris 2014; Nehles, van Riemsdijk, Kok and Looise, 2006) and what kind of resources and support line managers need from HR in devolvment (Renwick, 2003; Whittaker and Marchington, 2003).

Tyskbo (2020) addressed the importance of understanding the contextuality of line managers’ HRM involvement. He criticises conceptualizing different HR practices simply to broad categories, such as HR system. He sees that this may be problematic since different HR practices take different shape in action (Tyskbo, 2020, 819). He calls for focusing on individual practises to understand how line managers are involved in HR work and how those practices are implemented by line managers. (Ibid.,).

In recent study mapping HR devolution in digital era, Isari et al. (2019, 46) emphasized that *“HR professionals’ expectations will play crucial role in the process”*. Furthermore, they add that these expectations may turn to “self-fulfilling prophecies”. The study suggested HR managers expect HR unit’s role to increase when digital solutions emerge. Adding to that, building tailor-made arrangements for employees was believed to be centralized to HR unit, while handling decisions regarding employee career life-cycle were expected to become line managers’ responsibility (Isari, et al., 2019).

When drawing on the relevant scholarly discussions, the following research gap was generated:



Figure 1: Research Gap

Thus, this thesis is an effort to answer to two questions. First, there has been call for HRM devolution studies focusing on certain HR practices (Tyskbo, 2020). Furthermore, the need for studies focusing on digital aspect of HRM devolution (Isari, et al., 2019), is addressed.

These current research gaps may cause HR practitioners problems to understand how digitalization should be considered when planning to devolve HR activities. Secondly, when the discussion revolves around generic HR systems, contextualized understanding of specific HR practises might become useful when planning HR task devolvment for line managers (Tyskbo, 2020). Thirdly, organisational scholars might benefit from understanding that technology is undertheorized area in organisational research.

## 1.2 Research context and research questions

This study focuses on expectations HR managers set to company line managers. This is done by illustrating norms, beliefs and preferences (Biddle, 1979; 1986) line managers hold about HR practices. These two practises encompass remote work policy and goal setting. Secondly, this thesis tries to capture how digital tools seem to accelerate the devolvment of HR tasks in the near future. Thus, the thesis has been built around three themes: Remote work policy, goal setting and digital tools shaping the HR-line relationship. Literature on digitalization and leadership, as well as technology and organizing creates a context for my study. In other words, drawing on these literatures helps reader to understand the importance of digital solutions altering the way of work.

The study context is Finnish, white-collar expert work. The final data set consists of 13 interviews with Finnish HR managers. Two specific research questions are addressed:

1. In HR manager perspective, how devolvment of HR tasks shows in Finnish white-collar expert work?
2. How do emerging digital tools shape the role expectations of HR managers towards line managers?

This study joins literature about HRM devolution, focusing on Finnish, white-collar context. This is done through mapping which HR practices are most often devolved in this study context, and how HR managers perceive digital solutions affecting devolution process. The main objective is to shed light on expectations line managers face in their HR and leadership role in Finnish white-collar context in the digital era.

The structure of this thesis is the following. The next chapter, literature review covers the main theories of my thesis. It starts with literature on digitalization and technology's role in organizational research. Leadership requirements in digital era, are also addressed. Literature review then moves on to mapping the current knowledge on HRM devolution. The last section of literature review focuses on role theory. The multiple ways to approach role theory are discussed, as well the part of role theory utilized in this thesis. After literature review, I focus on methodological choices done on this thesis. The methodology chapter encompasses my ontological and epistemological choices, arguing for semi-structured interview study method, discussing my empirical data, thematic analysis as well as ethical considerations. The fourth chapter comprises my findings from the data. The fifth and the final chapter conclusions will discuss my findings in relation to previous studies as well limitations and further research avenues.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Digitalisation: effect on leadership and way of working

The topic of digitalization has begun to increase in the literature during the last ten years. The definitions for current era in which we are living are multiple. Wikipedia (2019) defines digitalization as “*process of converting information into a digital (i.e. computer-readable) format, in which the information is organized as bits*”. This formation of bits then forms a “*discrete set of its points or samples*” (Wikipedia, 2019). Interestingly, this definition lacks an organizational view on how digitalized, computer-mediated processes affect human interaction. In general language, referring to digitalization means usually that interaction or work processes are affected. Thus, more definitions were sought which would more readily describe the mentioned connection between organizing and digitalization. Notable was that definitions of digitalization in organisational setting were hard to find. For example, Pors (2015) inquired how bureaucratic encounters between citizens and Danish municipal service centre workers have changed. Pors (2015) uses phrase “digital era” – though not offering any clear definition what this digital era actually means. On the other hand, in his review on literature of public management sector, Greve (2015, 60) merely mentions that “*the digital era makes encounters increasingly digital and makes connections easier and provides a possibility for transparency*”.

The phrase digital era in organizational research is defined at least in Cascio and Montealegre (2016). They start by first separating the modern history into three eras: the agricultural era, the industrial era and the digital era (Cascio and Montealegre, 2016, 351-352). Agricultural era could be characterized by harnessing natural resources, and industrial era by application of industrial power, like engines and centralizing production to big industrial plants. In the digital era, productivity is based on taking advantage of information and communication technologies. Furthermore, authors see that the era can be characterised by infrastructure of information and communication technologies. These infrastructures not only offer possibility to do things more efficiently than before, but also change the way people work. By this authors suggest “*new ways of control, coordination and collaboration on activities more readily...*” (Cascio and Montealegre, 2016, 351).

Cascio and Montealegre (2016, 351-353) not only categorize three eras in human civilization, but they also see the digital era itself as a multisequence process. They separate development of technology into four sequences: Enterprise computing, end-user computing, strategic computing and ubiquitous computing. The first stage, enterprise computing, is a phase where mainframe computers came into picture. By this the authors refer to centralized data-centres, as well as to the idea of a single computer shared by multiple users. The second stage, end-user computing starting from late 1970s, already enabled business professionals to have a computer of their own. Later, strategic computing was an era where these computers were linked to each other by the help of Internet, enterprise application systems and client-server architectures. Thus, networking of supply chain became possible. Most recent development is the move to ubiquitous computing (Cascio and Montealegre, 2016, 353). Starting from the beginning of the current decade, technology has allowed professionals to access work environment independent of place and time. The term, ubiquitous computing, refers to possibility to link physical and electronic space together. With this linkage, overcoming the limitations of both physical and electronical world has become possible. This disruptive stage allows new ways of working, thus *“it may disrupt the way work is done in organizations”* (Cascio and Montealegre, 2016, 353).

Colbert, Yee and George (2016) call organisations to take full advantage of “digital fluency” – capability of digital workforce to go beyond of just handling with applications. Rather, fluency refers to workforce which is mindful about how to *“utilize technology to manage data, creatively represent information, solve problems, and design new products and ways of working”* (Colbert, et al., 2016, 732). They emphasize that the focus of research should not be just on how those people who are familiar with technology, use it. Rather, new ways to understand how technology can best serve organisations is as important.

According to Zammuto, et al., (2007, 752), key change has been work’s increasing information content that has changed the work itself and the social relations among people doing it. Information technologies have enabled workers from all organizational levels to focus tasks that are complex, judgement-related and creative (Zammuto, et al., 2007, 752). The key is visibility provided by IT, which has allowed new way of organizing. The authors focus on affordances, which define how well organizations can take advantage of new information technology. They suggest that not only functionality of the technology is significant. Rather, also *“the expertise, organizational processes and procedures, controls, boundary-spanning approaches, and other social capacities present”* are defining whether a company succeeds

with technology or not (Ibid.,). They further add that *“one cannot talk about complex technology without reference to the social setting, just as it makes limited sense to talk about a door handle without discussing the people opening the open doors”*.

In the report *Future of Jobs 2018*, World Economic Forum (WEF) proposed “augmentation strategy” to fully leverage the co-operation between automation of work tasks as well employees’ capability to use higher cognitive capacity and expert knowledge to perform tasks. By this, WEF refers to employees’ possibility to have access to lifelong learning system, company’s investment in human capital as well as decision makers active interaction in workforce strategy (WEF, 2018, ix). The report also highlights many important consequences that technology brings to workers and line managers. Organizations are facing, for instance, changing skill demands. This means necessity to think how to prepare their employees to retrain themselves. The report adds that it is important to offer possibilities inside the company for people to reskill their selves. This may cause experts with on-demand knowledge to improve their position in work market, and at the same time those with inability to reconfigure to have declining amount of job opportunities (WEF 2018, 12). According to WEF, skills needed in 2022 include growing need of competence in technology design and programming. As important as that, it seems that human skills, like creativity, critical thinking and resilience grow in importance (WEF 2018,12).

WEF makes suggestions for companies to face these upcoming skill challenges. Companies surveyed in the report were most likely to follow three strategies: *Hiring new permanent staff with skills relevant to new technologies, looking to automate the work and retraining existing employees* (WEF 2018, 13). Interestingly, the survey showed also that 65% of the companies were expecting employees to learn new skills without further training, and 61% would likely hire new temporary staff with skills relevant to new technologies (WEF 2018, 13). WEF also addresses the changing way of working of company managers. The report states that *“Companies will need to pursue a range of organizational strategies in order to stay competitive in the face of rapidly changing workforce skills requirements. To do this, the skills of executive leadership and the human resources function will also need to evolve to successfully lead the transformation”* (WEF 2018, 12).

In their expert survey conducted by interviewing 49 German digitalization experts, Schwarzmüller et al. (2018, 127) outlined numerous capability requirements that digitalization has posed to leaders: intercultural & language competencies, leading from distance, managing

uncertainty and complexity, ability to handle and initiate change (relational skills), need for IT competencies and need for life-long learning. Cascio & Montealegre (2016, 356) call for leaders' ability to tolerate ambiguity, understanding the large picture by integrating different types of information and skill to motivate employees to move to same direction. Avolio et al., (2000; 2014) have done seminal work in linking digitalization and leadership together. Their effort and introduction of "E-leadership" captures how technology mediates leadership's social process. In their later version, E-leadership is defined as "*a social influence process embedded in both proximal and distal contexts mediated by AIT (Advanced Information Technology) that can produce a change in attitudes, feelings, thinking, behavior, and performance*" (Avolio, et al. 2014, 107).

Cortellazzo, et al.'s (2019) literature review focused on the intersection of leadership and digitalization, including articles with three conditions: The leader was a person who guided a group, an organisation, or empower transformational processes; there was a clear reference to digital or technological transformation; there was a clear link between information technology and leadership (Cortellazzo, et al., 2019, 5). Their review suggests that communicating through digital media, high speed decision-making, managing disruptive change, managing connectivity and renaissance of technical skills were the most prominent discussions in current literature about leadership in digital era (Cortellazzo, et al., 2019, 11-13). According to the review, the body of knowledge in studies considering digitalization in leadership has grown recently. The authors show that the phenomenon started slowly to generate studies already at the beginning of the current millennium. They state that all peer-reviewed articles in study are published after 2000, although 60 percent of them are published after 2014 (Cortellazzo, et al., 2019, 4). Next, the following chapter introduces role of technology in organization and management research area.

## 2.2 Technology and digitalization in organization and management research

Since 1980s technology has intrigued organizational scholars. However, the number of studies in the intersection of technology and organizations is limited. In 2007, Zammuto, et al. (2007, 750) made an interesting notion – Only 2.4% out of organizational inquiry articles published from 1996 to 2005 in Academy of Management Journal, Academy of Management Review and Administrative Science Quarterly, considered leading journals in the field, dealt with technology's impact on organization. Similarly, Cortellazzo et al. (2019) noticed in their review of digitalization and leadership that digitalization's effect on leadership is still undertheorized. First, the review generated only 54 articles which had a clear linkage between digitalisation and leadership in organizations and management field (Cortellazzo, et al., 2019, 5). Furthermore, only a few articles were conceptual and 37 out of 54 were empirical, revealing lack of theorization of technology's impact on leadership (Cortellazzo, et al., 2019, 4). Orlikowski and Scott (2008) reported that only 4.9% of the studies between January 1997 and December 2006 in one of the leading journals in the field: ASQ, AMJ, AMR and Organization Science dealt with technological implications on organizations.

Orlikowski and Scott (2008, 435-436) speak of paradox in organisational research: Even though the role of technology is acknowledged, it is not studied. They see one reason involves multifaceted nature of organizational life - issues are *“economic, political, strategic, psychological, and sociological—not just technological ones”*. They add that *“Attending to all these elements within a single study or even a single program of study is particularly challenging, perhaps even infeasible”*. When choosing between these issues, technology is often passed over (Ibid.,). For another explanation, they suggest that many organisational scholars come from backgrounds and educations where focus is on *“human, cultural, and economic elements of institutions, not material ones”*. Organisational scholars may also see that technology is simply *“part of the institutional infrastructure, akin to the ‘utilities’ of electricity, telephony or public transportation”*. Orlikowski and Scott (2008, 436) state that this paradox is dangerous. Technology doesn't deserve the required attention, and it is given a static role. Orlikowski and Scott (2008, 436) explain that organisational scholars may lack training or skills with technological matters. They address several questions why lack of research about technology, while it is present in organizational practice, might be problematic. First, work gets increasingly global, and reliance on enterprise-wide infrastructure as well as communication media is necessary when there are multiple locations people work from. This requires research



about technological entailments that are “*far from simple, straightforward, certain, or predictable*”. Furthermore, their call for papers about technology in organizations is rooted to fact that technology changes “norms and forms of structuring”. Lastly, it is important to understand who are the people facing technological changes, and how it changes the work environment (Ibid.,).

Furthermore, Orlikowski and Scott (2008) and Orlikowski (2009) have done pivotal work in mapping how technology has appeared in management literature in 50 years before their research. Orlikowski (2009) describes four distinct research streams or schools of thought: a) *absent-presence*, b) *exogenous force*, c) *emergent force* and d) *entanglement in practice*. These four approaches represent different ontology of thought. Absent-present scholars by name typically focus merely on socially mediated changes in organization, thus outscoping any inquiry where technology has occasioned the change. According to Orlikowski (2009), exogenous force relies on ontology of positivity: technology is seen as technical instrument, which has direct impact on human behaviour and organizations. This means goal is to make generalizable findings and statistical cause-effect correlations between technology and its’ change to organizing. Emergent force, then, represent different ontology. It builds on constructivism, seeing all technological change inevitably through the lens of human action. Focus is on how technology is interpreted, and how people engage with technology. The view of emergent force is based on ethnographic approach. It focuses to specific socio-cultural and historical context in effort to distinct ways how technology can change work systems or work practices in different ways in different context. This has implications for research design. Even though the research site may be selected based on particular technology, the focus shifts to how people use technology, how interaction evolves and how organizing plays out (Leonardi and Barley, 2008, 167). This causes technology often to vanish to background and to forget what constraints and affordances it has offered.

The final, and the latest school of thought, entanglement-in-practise, seeks to seize the separation between technology and human action. Keyword is sociomateriality, which means seeing material artefacts as inseparable part from human action, not giving overemphasis to neither technology (exogenous force) or human action (emergent force). The key is practice-based approach. Sociomateriality emphasizes how materiality and social aspect entangle together in everyday action, *doings/actions that perform particular phenomena*” (Orlikowski, 2009, 135). Thus, focus is on performance: How the way people act change or stabilize certain

context. This view also appreciates the fact that the use of technology evolves over time. Modifiable technologies may occur differently depending on which stage of implementation is taken into consideration. That means entanglement of social and material also evolve over time, requiring a researcher to stay longer to track the sociomaterial effects of technology (Leonardi and Barley, 2008, 168).

While Orlikowski (2009) criticises the first three approaches and suggests *entanglement-in-practise* as a solution to fill the void in linking technology and organizing in management research, Barley (2015) makes critique of his own towards this stream. He suggests that while this approach encouraged ontological shift to studying specific practises emerging from the use of technological artefacts, the role of organizational structure and work systems is left aside. He then calls for approach which acknowledges both, “*constructionist concern with concrete, while linking situated action to meso-level, if not more molar, changes in organizations and occupations.*” (Barley, 2015, 6)

Indeed, Barley (1986; 1990) and his research on radiologists’ and technicians’ work in the brink of introducing new X-ray machines has been ground-breaking effort to highlight the technology’s socially mediated nature. Barley applies Nadel’s (1957; see Barley and Kunda 2001) line of thought of nonrelational and relational role elements. Barley and Kunda (2001, 89) see that “*one cannot properly speak of social change until changes in work practices affect interaction*”. This means that ultimately changes in even solitary tasks, like cleaning the office, will change social structure by “*altering or expanding role sets, shifting dependencies, or changing the frequency and content of encounters.*” A janitor e.g. might start to use new machine, which is more effective than hand-used swab. This decreases the encounters between office workers and janitor from every two weeks to one week. Thus, technology allows people to do things in new ways, which consequently changes their work roles. They are expected different things than before, and they have new skills to conduct the work. By Barley’s idea, this eventually also changes role relations between people and may mean working with members of occupations with whom one hasn’t worked before (Leonardi and Barley, 2008, 165). Unlike the approach of Orlikowski and Scott (2008) or Orlikowski (2009), focus is given to dependencies inside the organization rather than to everyday action or performance, like in practice-based approach.

Barley (2015) gives his own detailed account about how technology and organizations entangle in academic discussion. According to Barley, 60s and 70s were decades of contingent theorist as well as socio-technical systems theorist. This meant that scholars of that time focused to describe technologies in general and their implications for company performance, not putting too much weight on microlevel analysis. Dissatisfied with too generalized and macro-level view of technology, 90s was time to move on to inquire how identical machines could produce different organization – technology's role in organizing became *in situ* (Barley 2015, 6).

Leonardi and Barley (2008) participate also to discussion of the role of technology in organizations and management research. They argue that there are two distinct schools of thought what comes to technology and implications for organizations. First, determinism represents idea of technology being contingent force to which organizations have to adjust. This means determinist scholars see material artefacts, like geography and technology to shape human action. Vice versa, idealist scholars favour the view that human action and social norms, ideas and values have the upper hand. Authors state that the problem to this dichotomy is twofold: Materialistic accounts are being accused of being determinist and of forgetting the role of human. On the other hand, idealist accounts downplay the role of constraints and affordances that technology inevitably posit (Leonardi and Barley, 2008, 161). This disagreement between these two academic traditions may cause overlook. First, materialistic accounts need not to be determinist. Secondly, idealist accounts do not always forget the role of materialism or disrespect that technology sets constraints and possibilities for human action (Leonardi and Barley, 2008, 163).

Leonardi and Barley (2008, 169) also pinpoint the difference of social constructivist and social constructionism. According to them, the previous asks why similar organisations experience *different* outcome with the same technology, while the latter why *different* organizations experience *similar* outcome with the same technology.

## 2.3 HRM Devolution

More and more, line managers are held responsible of conducting company HR tasks. The fact that line managers are the ultimate force driving HR practises implementation, is recognized by scholars. The role of line managers determines whether HR driven change triumphs or cascades (e.g. Sikora and Ferris, 2014; Williams, 2019). The discussion in literature goes by name “HRM devolution”. It refers to shift of HR responsibilities to middle managerial responsibilities (e.g. Cascon-Pereira and Valverde, 2014; Whittaker and Marchington, 2003). Kulik and Perry (2008, 542) define devolvment as “*transfer of responsibilities from HR specialists working in and identified with a centralized HR unit to line managers in other units*”. Devolution has been investigated at least in the perspectives of the divergence and convergence of role expectations between HR professionals and line managers (Op de Beeck, Wynen and Hondeghem, 2016; Nik Mat and Zabidi, 2017; Gilbert, De Winne and Sels, 2011), successful organisational contingencies in devolvment efforts (Nik Mat and Barret, 2015; Sikora and Ferris, 2014) and the role of HR’s support in devolvment (Renwick, 2003; Whittaker and Marchington, 2003; Larsen and Brewster, 2003). To date, no general agreement about whether the devolvment development is beneficial or not, exists. Scholars are scattered to different schools. Some scholars see devolution increasing line managers empowerment to their work, while other see that devolution adds to line managers’ increasing workload (see e.g. Intindola, et al., 2017; Cascon-Pereira and Valverde, 2014).

The discussion about HRM devolution is not new: scholars have recognized the phenomenon already in 1990s. In their account, Larsen and Brewster (2003, 237) showed that already in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, line management was in main responsibility in handling three HR tasks: Pay and benefits, recruitment and selection and training and development. Among the surveyed European countries, Finland was consistently among the top three countries with most line involvement in all HR issues (Larsen and Brewster, 2003, 240).

One of the most thorough devolution studies has been the literature review made by Intindola, Weisinger, Benson and Pitz (2017). Their search through academic databases produced a sample of over 300 books, journal articles, magazine articles and discussion papers ranging from 1997-2015. Intindola et al. (2017, 1802-1803) made a special effort to group studies based on the contingency in level of analysis. They found that most of the devolution studies focused

on organisational level, secondly to HRM team level and thirdly to individual level. Individual level of analysis encompasses, for instance, line manager's confidence or age to be defining factor in devolution success. HRM team level refers to practises and organisational programs affecting devolution. By organisational level, authors speak of "*pervasive organisational characteristics*" and "*contingencies happening to the entire organisation*" (Intindola, et al., 2017, 1803). Moreover, the authors added to analysis the specific factors that affect devolution success. The three most studied contingency factors of devolution success were training of line managers, offering systems of support for line managers and focusing on devolvment rationale/strategy (Intindola, et al., 2017, 1804).

One rare study about HRM devolution and its effect on HR departments reputation was made by Kulik and Perry (2008). Kulik and Perry's (2008, 545) data from over 20 industrial sectors and 174 HR decision-makers maps which strategy works best to improve reputation of HR department. The options were whether to devolve, or not. Their quantitative data suggests that devolvment had positive effect both on the construed image of HR unit and the perceived strategic role, suggesting that devolvment is a favourable development to build HR's reputation inside the organisation.

Most of the literature in HRM devolution, though, is quite different from the Kulik and Perry (2008) study. In my literature review of HRM devolution, I separate between three categories. First, I introduce literature considering success factors of HR devolvment. Secondly, I go through the articles that take advantage of role theoretical approach and relationship between HR and line managers. Thirdly, the literature revolving around role of HR support, is discussed. The section ends with discussion of prominent research avenues as well as current gaps in literature of HRM devolution.

### 2.3.1 Organisational success factors of HR devolvment

Most of the devolvment literature revolves around what are the specific contingencies or success factors affecting HR devolvment (Intindola, et al., 2017). This literature is explicated below.

Nehles, et al.'s (2006) research focused on five factors that might possibly hinder line managers to implement HR practices: lack of desire, lack of capacity, lack of competency, lack of support and lack in suitable policies or procedures. In their case study, they inquired four different business units in one of the world's biggest electronic companies (Nehles, et al., 2006, 260). Consistent finding was that desire (or lack of it) didn't play a role, as line managers recognized their supposed HR role. Capacity, then, *did* play a role in all inquired business units. This means 20-40% of the interviewed line managers perceived lack of capacity as a challenge (Nehles, et al., 2006, 264). There were great variation considering the other factors. The study suggests that challenges perceived were business unit dependent in areas of competency, support and policies and procedures. Authors suggest that the level line managers were informed, the amount of HR practice training, the educational level of line managers as well as job complexity affected the perceptions (Nehles, et al., 2006, 268-269). Authors also found that line managers search for support in different ways. In day-to-day issues they turn to colleagues or superiors, but in legal issues or about specific regulations the contact is HR department (Nehles, et al., 2006, 267).

In their view, Sikora and Ferris (2014, 273) see social interaction factors, like organisational culture, climate and political considerations as main variables in how front-line managers perceive practices introduced by HR. These factors are based on social context theory, conceptualized by Ferris et al. (1998). The theory states that organisational social context influences how HR systems are turned into effective HR practice implementation, and this process affects organisational effectiveness (Sikora and Ferris 2014, 273-274). Thus, consideration should be given to organisational context affecting implementation of HR system.

On the other hand, Björkman et al. (2011) focused on the effect of HR managers' experience, education and HR function's strategic approach and networking activities on internationalization of HRM practices by senior line managers. They concluded that these factors play an important role in how line managers view HR and how well HR practises are implemented by senior line managers.

Maxwell and Watson (2006) built their study on both HR and line manager perspectives – noting that in order to create effective business performance, the perception of devolvment of both parties should meet. Three crucial conditions come to play. First, why the line manager should be involved in HR. Secondly, clearly defining HR role in order to implement devolved

tasks effectively. Finally, crucial was how well line managers find importance and then commit to their HR role. The article suggests that HR managers perceive the degree of HR devolution often larger than line managers. These contradictions between perceptions about responsibilities of HR tasks are introduced in the following chapter.

### 2.3.2 Role theoretical approach

Studies that apply role theory inspect the relationship between HR and line managers. The focus is especially on what are the role expectations of HR managers, and how these expectations are answered by line managers (Nik Mat and Barret, 2015; Nik Mat and Zabidi, 2017; Op de Beeck, et al., 2016)

Role theoretical framework has been utilized in two recent studies in context of Asian airport workers. Nik Mat and Barret (2015) studied perceptions of role senders (expectations of HR professionals towards line managers) in two airports in Malaysia. They concluded that HRM role expectation from role-senders (senior managers and HR representatives) were higher in the larger organisation, thus suggesting that size of organisation is a contextual factor influencing devolvment efforts (Nik Mat and Barret 2015, 125). One other study of Nik Mat and Zabidi (2017) was conducted also in airport context in Malaysia. In this study, both the perspectives of role sender and role receiver were considered - also line managers were interviewed. This was done by applying role theoretical approach of role expectation and role taking (see e.g. Biddle 1986), where role taking refers to acceptance of role conferred to person by other organisational members (Wickham and Parker, 2007). Their results suggested that role taking isn't a clear-cut process, rather organisational, interpersonal and personal factors caused line managers not take the roles conferred to them the way role senders expected (Nik Mat and Zabidi, 2017).

Op de Beeck et al. (2016) similarly studied perceptions of devolution by role sender (HR professionals) and of role receiver (role experienced by line manager). Discrepancy of HR-line perceptions about the number of devolved tasks was studied (Op de Beeck, et al., 2016, 1904). Scholars emphasized the role of *HR instruments and information, organisational support and (personnel) red tape* to be important factors affecting successful devolution process (Op de Beeck, et al., 2016, 1905). In other words, this means that providing clearer tools for line

managers in devolvment is crucial. Secondly, building atmosphere that values line managers HR task contributions is important. Thirdly, it is important to include HR tasks as performance objectives. Also, adding HR tasks to job description of line managers as well as minimizing unnecessary red tape (bureaucracy, paperwork, regulations) in devolvment helps to minimize the discrepancy between role expectations of line and HR (Op de Beeck et al. 2016, 1906-1907).

Furthermore, the authors measured individual level factors as well as interpersonal factors and whether they affected to differing perspectives of HR and line management about degree of HR devolution (Op de Beeck, et al., 2016, 1906-1908). The study indicated that divergence about individual capacity to handle HR tasks caused HR and line managers see the degree of devolution the same way. In other words, this means that HR might rate lower line managers capacity to handle HR tasks, thus handling HR tasks that are “easy” for line managers and easily acceptable for them. On the other hand, interpersonal factors such as trust and good relationship between HR and line managers didn’t have significant effect on degree of HR devolution perceptions between two parties. All in all, organisational factors (support and red tape) were those to affect the most to differing views of HR devolution (Op de Beeck, et al., 2016, 1913).

Gilbert, De Winne and Sels (2011) suggest it is important to consider how role ambiguity and role overload affect success in HR devolution progresses. According to Gilbert et al., (2011), role clarity plays a vital role in successful HRM devolution. Gilbert et al. (2011) focused on role stressors – what kind of psychological challenges devolvment of HR tasks causes to front-line managers. They focused distinctly to three areas: The number of devolved HR responsibilities, The level of support/institutional incentive to perform HR role well and personal competency of front-line manager in HR tasks (Gilbert et al., 2011, 552). They found out that number of HR tasks didn’t play a significant role as a HR role stressor, but HR department support was a good way to help line managers with HR role overload. What comes to HR role ambiguity, the best weapon to tackle it was building line managerial competency in HR tasks (Gilbert, et al., 2011).

Taking advantage of tensions perspective, Link and Müller (2015) inquired how tensions emerge when HR work is devolved to line managers. Their main finding was that line managers struggled between rules and regulations set by HR and taking personal responsibility (Link and Müller, 2015, 292). The tensions arouse because company had made detailed instructions e.g.



on how to conduct selection, appraisal or dismissal interviews. Conflicting was the idea that taking personal responsibility was considered as one of the core values of the organisation. Authors suggest that there should be better feedback between the guidelines set by HR and the actual implementation done by line managers. They warn that if this feedback is missing, tensions might lead to “deprofessionalization” of HR work and poorer economic performance of the company (Link and Müller, 2015, 300).

### 2.3.3 HR’s supportive role

One of the most studied area in HRM devolution is the HR’s supportive role (e.g. Whittaker and Marchington 2003; Renwick 2003). Ulrich (1995; cited in Larsen and Brewster, 2003, 231) offers a quart-dimensional categorisation for possible HR roles: Administrative Expert, Employee Champion, Change Agent and Strategic Partner. Larsen and Brewster (2003, 232) see that HR specialist choice of Administrative Expert or Employee Champion might drive line managers and HR specialist apart, while the latter two to may be more prominent for HR to build good relationship towards their line management colleagues. These two roles require HR professionals to contribute. This means that they should participate in creation of HR policies as well as implementation jointly with line managers (Ibid.,).

One other role classification is provided by Nehles, et al. (2006, 257). They separate between “HR interventionist” and HR as “advisor” or “service provider” based on previous literature, suggesting that HR is taking more the non-interventionalist role and interventionist roles are devolved to line managers. The problem according to paper is that line managers often seem to be incapable or not motivated to take the interventionist role in HR issues.

Larsen and Brewster (2003, 232) suggest that HR professionals need to bring their expertise, knowledge and skill to the table. This means they must take different position on HR tasks that line managers do. Authors explicate that this is exactly what they should do. If line manager proposes something that “*their professional expertise tells them that it is wrong to do so*” (Larsen and Brewster, 2003, 232). This might cause HR specialist not to feel as comfortable colleagues, as “*internal consultants*”, but it is a necessary precondition to build jointly agreeable policies (Ibid.,).

Whittaker and Marchington (2003) also suggest that to devolve tasks effectively, it is responsibility of HR to walk through the process with line managers. If lacking HR support, line managers will not necessarily buy in to devolvment process. Renwick's (2003) study supports this notion, as he states that even a capable manager cannot handle the devolvment process without the assistance of HR.

Larsen and Brewster (2003, 229) pinpoint several crucial challenges when devolving HR tasks to line and what should be taken into consideration in the realm of line managerial work. First, line managers may lack the motivation and time to conduct HR tasks properly. Secondly, HR might fail in training line managers in HR issues, and line managers may not be aware of the recent developments in HRM. Lastly, line managers may miss the organisational big picture in HRM. They may not be interested in long-term view on HR issues, which makes them poor at making policy in this area.

Also, they further suggest that as line managerial context becomes increasingly virtual and networked, the role of line managers gets ambiguous comparing to former, more bureaucratic organisational setting (Larsen and Brewster, 2003, 230). This means that it is less clear what are the task boundaries for line managers and possible conflicting responsibilities with current workload.

Williams (2019) inquires the role of HR support when new technological solutions alter the way work is done. The study focuses on flexible work arrangements (FWAs) – the possibility brought by technology to work independent of place and time and with possibility to carve how work is done in practise (Williams, 2019, 914). The article emphasizes that FWAs are often unofficial and negotiated between employee and supervisor, which may cause that they are not visible to HR or senior management (Williams, 2019, 915). Williams (2019) sees that HR plays a pivotal role in supporting line managers in implementing new HR practises. Crucial role is given to HR system and its' distinctiveness, consistency and consensus (orig. Bowen and Ostroff, 2004). HR system encompasses HR policies, practices, general guidelines of HR and how HR processes are communicated (Williams, 2019, 916). This helps in providing for line sufficient knowledge, skills and structural support to implement functional flexible work arrangements (Williams 2019, 915). Williams (2019, 925-926) concludes by separating between HR actions which either support HR system and thus functionable FWAs, and actions that constrain managers to make suitable decisions. Positive perception about FWAs was

achieved by strategically aligning FWAs with organisational goals, using technology to facilitate FWAs and discussing with managers about how FWAs could best be implemented. The main hindrance in implementing functionable FWAs included limited training and support from HR, which caused multiple interpretations about FWAs between HR and line managers. Also, if the HR system and FWA approval process for line managers was heavy to conduct, it caused line managers to rely on informal FWAs where trusted high performers were unfairly favoured.

McCarthy, Darcy and Grady (2010) focused on the role of line managers in decisions considering WLB- Work-Life balance. They suggest that line managers play a pivotal role in satisfaction of employees about flexible work policies. Moreover, this study is one of the few in effort to unravel the meso-level, mediator role of line managers between HR policies and practices at hand (McCarthy et al., 2010, 159). By this, authors refer to possible distance of intended HR policy and the actual practice of line managers conducting given HR policy. In order to WLB policy devolvement to be successful, authors argue that involving line managers in policy formation, emphasising positive organisational outcome of WLBs, positive personal experience of WLBs and awareness of company WLB policies and programs contributes engages line managers to WLB practice (McCarthy et al., 2010). Next, the concluding remarks about HRM devolution literature include speculating emerging research streams, as well as current research gaps.

#### 2.3.4 Prominent research avenues: Devolved HR practices and digitality in devolvement

Beyond literature about organisational success factors, HR-line management relationship and HR's supportive role, there seems to be lack of studies about what HR tasks are devolved. In their literature review of over 300 chapters, papers and books about HR devolution, Intindola et al. (2017) surprisingly found out that only one paper focused on HR tasks and debate about what are the responsibilities between HR and line managers. They see that there is a lack of studies focusing on specific tasks chosen for devolvement and how well employees are committed to devolvement process. They call for further research in these areas of devolvement literature. Moreover, they critique the current literature by stating that *“in summary, research to date leaves important questions unaddressed: Which are the key individual attributes of both HR and line managers that may affect the success of devolvement? Which organisational characteristics predicate successful devolvement? What are the cultures like in those*

*organizations that report positive devolvement outcomes?”* (Intindola, et al., 2017, 1800). Adding to this list, there seems to be need to study technology’s role in devolution. HRM devolution isn’t exception to trend where technology in organizational research in general is understudied area (e.g. Orlikowski and Scott, 2008; Zammuto, et al., 2007, Cortellazzo, et al., 2019).

One recent paper answers call for research on specific HR practises by inquiring performance appraisal (PA) devolution in Swedish medical technology organization, MedLine (Tyskbo, 2020). This study was also exceptional in its multi-participant approach. Tyskbo (2020) included views of employees, line managers and HR managers to his study. Tyskbo (2020, 828-832) suggests that between the intended and implemented HR practices (see e.g. Evans, 2015; Björkman, et al., 2011) there were three factors: Dilemmas, understandings and local adaptations. First, line managers were unsure e.g. about what is the priority of performance appraisal and how many “top performers” could there be. This means uncertainty in a situation where separation of level of performance between employees had to be made. There were occasions where line manager opted to choose different scale of appraisal than originally intended by HR. This study suggests that understanding the context where line manager operates is crucial in understanding why some intended practices fail in practise.

One another study focusing on single HR practise is of Walker and Hamilton (2011). They inquired employment rights disputes and found out that line managers lacked the needed skills and time in handling employee grievances. Also, the support from HR was considered conflicting, as line managers preferred still in larger grievance cases to handle issues to HR. The problem was that HR didn’t anymore consider grievance handling to be their role (Walker and Hamilton, 2011, 421). The conclusion of paper was that HR department’s involvement in the process was crucial and total devolvement considered as a risk (Walker and Hamilton, 2011).

The digital development and its implications on leadership requirements (see e.g. Schwarzmüller et al. 2018) has received attention by Isari, Bissola & Imperatori (2019, 44). They see that devolution of HR tasks to line managers may be affected due to change in way workers are organized and managed. They argue that two preconditions for the impact on devolution are crucial. First, HR managers expectations on their own work relating to near future scenario where smart-based technology is introduced, play critical significance.

Secondly, HR professionals' own capability with smart-technology tools affects their perception of HR tasks devolvment. Isari et al.'s (2019) findings indicated that HR professionals expect themselves to have greater role in people management practices with the help of digital tools. At the same time, this means HR professionals expect that line managers' role in people management practises won't increase. Adding to this, HR professionals felt that some HR practises are better handled by line managers with the help of digitalization, while other practises become more centralized to HR unit. Capability to handle smart-technology tools was linked to positive expectation of line managers handling employee careers, such as informing them about training, development and mobility (Isari et al., 2019, 57). Contrary to this, technology-readiness of HR professionals was positively linked to centralization of tailor-made employment solutions (ibid.). The expectations of HR professionals about devolvment is addressed in the paper. Isari et al. (2020, 44) speak of HR managers' self-expectations easily turning to "self-fulfilling prophecies". The next section of literature review introduces theoretical framework, role theory.

## 2.4 Theoretical framework: Role theory

The aim of this study is to shed light on what expectations HR managers hold towards line managers. Thus, role theory is utilized. First, Nadel (1957) and his twofold theory about relational and nonrelational role aspects, guided the initial coding. Secondly, Biddle (1986) and his three-dimensional categorisation of expectation (norms, preferences and beliefs) is utilized in analysing the data and generating findings.

Organisational scholars have recognized the utility of role theory for already decades back in organizations and management research (Nadel, 1957; Kahn et al., 1964; Katz and Kahn, 1978; Barley, 1990; Biddle, 1986). However, there are multiple approaches to role theory, even inside of the field (Biddle, 1979). Elusiveness of role theory is discussed in many papers (Biddle, 1979; 1986; Mantere, 2008; Wickham and Parker, 2007). First, role theory is a wide arena where different sub-schools have different underpinnings about whether social context or individual qualities play part in equation (Biddle, 1979; 1986). Secondly, role theory most often assumes a box for an individual where there is little room for manoeuvre. In other words, limited attention is given for individual agency to shape one's own role in social setting (Mantere, 2008).

In his account, Biddle (1986) makes a contribution to map branches inside role theory, different versions of it, and integrations of those schools. He distinguishes between five perspectives on role theory: Functional role theory, Symbolic interactionist role theory, Structural role theory, Organisational role theory and Cognitive role theory (Biddle, 1986, 70-76). These schools differ in how they see individual agency against social context. One school sees that an individual can define role with own action, the other sees role reflecting social position a person is holding (Biddle, 1986, 86). In other words, some of these approaches (symbolic interactionist and cognitive) prefer to say that individual agency carves what people are expected and what they expect of each other. On the other hand, some schools of thought (structural, functional, organisational) see the role behaviour is based on social position of the holder.

Furthermore, in his critical take on role theory, Biddle argues that role theory field could be called “*as broad as the ocean and as shallow as a mud puddle*” (Biddle 1979, 8). He argues, though, that there can be found underlying propositions behind role theory of which there is a level of agreement along the scholars. He offers a summary of five of these propositions (Biddle 1979, 8), First, role theorist assert that pattern of behaviour characteristic of person exists, which forms a role in a given context. Secondly, sharing a common identity refers to social position which associates with role. Expectations, on the other hand, born when persons are aware of the roles assigned to others or to them. Functionality of roles refers to fact that roles are often imbedded within larger social system, and a role carries a consequences. Finally, roles do not come automatically – a person must be socialized and taught to a role. When the role is adopted, a person performing the role may find “joy or sorrow” in the given role (Ibid.,).

As already stated, role theory is elusive in many ways. There are multiple ways to approach it – at least what comes to individual decision power and social context. This thesis focuses on the role of expectations HR managers set to line managers. Thus, the part of role theory utilized for the purpose of this is thesis is discussed next.

The theory Barley applies (1990, 67) to his seminal studies on how technology shapes role expectations between organisational actors is based on the negotiation on how “*technology’s material constraints are transformed into social process*”. He elaborates on Nadel’s (1957) theory which separates between nonrelational and relational role aspects. The previous, nonrelational, can be defined as actions that would not require a partner to be conducted

successfully. This could mean, for example, a baker making a bread without any other helping him. On the other hand, relationality in this theory refers to change of nonrelational aspects of work. This might mean e.g. that work previously done in paper changes to computer-based work, which eventually alters the social interaction between people. Originally, I was more interested to utilize Nadel's (1957) theory on roles as the theoretical framework. This separation between nonrelational and relational role aspects, was indeed utilized in the initial grouping of codes. This coding and analysis of data is explicated further in the methodology chapter. The next section introduces the theory on role expectations, which forms theoretical framework of this thesis.

Biddle (1979;1986) has focused specifically in the aspect of expectations inside the role theory. Biddle (1979, 127) classifies between *modes of personal expectation*. It includes two ways of classifying expectations. First way is to distinct whether expectations are held towards oneself or towards others. Secondly, Biddle separates between prescriptions (demands), cathexes (assessments) and descriptions (assertions). Prescriptions refer to utterances where something is expected of the receiver and these statements includes a hint of consequence (e.g. *He should do the laundry*). Prescriptions are efforts of attempted influence. Cathexes, however, mean ways of expressing of what would and would not satisfy the subject stating the expectations. Example of cathexes could be *I would like him to do the laundry*. Cathexes are more often subtle than prescriptions, as they do not contain as clear implications for consequences of compliance as do prescriptions. However, cathexes do announce hope for someone to change their behaviour. Finally, descriptions are way to pronounce (assert) action in present (*He now does the laundry*), past (*He did laundry*) and the future (*He will do laundry*).

What comes to vocabulary, Biddle (1979, 131) wraps up which common language words should be associated to each of these modes. He argues that *descriptive expectations* are sometimes called "*beliefs, social perceptions, anticipations, opinions or cognitions*". Prescriptive on the other hand as "*norms, demands or request forms*" and Cathectic expectations as "*values, evaluations or sometimes preferences*". Besides modes described above, Biddle explains what forms expectations might take. Norms refer to privately held thoughts of what ought or not to ought do, like *she should not smoke that much*. Preferences refer to liked or disliked characteristics (I don't like salty food). Beliefs, then are privately held perceptions (*I think there are no gays in team sports*).

Biddle (1986) and his three-dimensional categorisation of expectation is utilized in my data analysis. Biddle argues that role expectations might take at least three forms: norms, preferences and beliefs (Biddle 1986, 75). Biddle adds that each of these may or may not be shared by other people in the same context, can affect behaviour and may all be involved in generating a role. The aim in this thesis is to capture these norms, preferences and beliefs of study participants when trying to explain what, why and how they expect something from line managers in their organisations.

The theory on role expectations cannot pass true without healthy criticism. Biddle himself (1979, 5-6) argues that the term *expectation* is no way unproblematic to use. According to him, it has been used to refer e.g. to norms, values, feelings or even to perceptions of what others think. He suggests caution and utters that “*one must view the expectational explanation of roles with grain of salt*”. Adding to this, it should be taken into account that theory of expectations can’t tell whether these expectations turn subsequent role behaviour. This means that *conformity* by role receiver of sent expectations cannot automatically be expected (Biddle, 1979; Wickham and Parker, 2007). Probably the most cited work considering the relationship between expectations and receiving the expectations is the framework of Kahn and his colleagues (Kahn et al., 1964; Katz and Kahn 1978). The model tries to wrap up the process how a “focal person”, referring to person receiving role expectations, performs those role expectations in her role set. Performing role expectations isn’t a clear-cut operation – organisational factors, attributes of the person and interpersonal factors between role sender and focal person play significance (Katz and Kahn, 1978, 196). Other way around, a focal person has room to manoeuvre in the way he chooses to perform the expected role sent to him. This is called role behaviour, which thereafter reshapes the expectations focused on the focal person and the role expectations sent to him. The process is, then, ongoing.

This study is an example of HRM devolution literature where single respondent group, is addressed (Intindola, et al., 2017). Here the accounts of HR professionals form my empirical material, and interviews do not include accounts of line managers or employees. I feel it then necessary to acknowledge that this thesis does not focus on focal person (Katz and Kahn, 1978), the person receiving role expectations. Instead, the focus is on the norms, preferences and beliefs (Biddle, 1986) interviewed HR managers hold towards line managers.



Like Isari et al., (2019) suggested, the expectations of HR managers might lead to “self-fulfilling prophecies”. Thus, it can be said that these expectations of HR managers carry consequences for line managers. This makes expectations significant, carrying consequences to the role of line managers in HRM devolution.

The next chapter, methodology, describes the choices made to conduct this research as rigorously as possible.

### 3. Methodology

This section starts by arguing for my ontological and epistemological choices done in the thesis. Secondly, I describe why semi-structured interview is used as the study method. After that, study participants and study context is introduced. Here, I will explicate the content of my empirical material. After showing what kind of data I have used, I describe thematic analysis as my method in data analysis. The last section of methodology includes the evaluation of the study as well as ethical considerations.

Like in any other qualitative approach, the aim is to understand socially constructed cultural meanings (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). This thesis leans on philosophical standpoint that subjective experience is what constructs reality. Subjectivity leans on perceptions and experiences of each person which may change during time (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). Closely linked to question about ontology is the epistemological choices a researcher makes. If ontology answers question “What is there in the world?”, epistemology considers “*What is knowledge and what are the sources and limits of knowledge?*” (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, 13). Since my focus is on human action, the focus is on interaction of people and how they interpret technology. My epistemological approach is closest to what Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, 15) call “substantialism”: Acknowledging material (in my case, technological) reality, though understanding that it may be perceived differently depending on study context.

In summary, this thesis aims to join organisational research stream what Leonardi and Barley (2008) would call social constructionism: Inquiring why *different* organizations experience *similar* outcome with the same technology. Furthermore, the thesis is an effort to answer to

Barley's (2015, 6) call for studies with "*constructionist concern with concrete, while linking situated action to meso-level, if not more molar, changes in organizations and occupations.*" In other words, the goal is to acknowledge both the material constraints as well as how people operate within these constraints.

### 3.1 Method: Semi-structured interview study

The study method of the thesis is semi-structured interview. The main goal is to find patterns in data and give "rich description" (Braun and Clarke 2006) of the phenomenon, in this case HRM devolution in Finnish white-collar context. Semi-structured interview design was very useful, as it allows re-ordering questions as well as making specifying questions about topics, themes and issues inquired (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). Adding to that, both interviewers are experienced academics holding Postdoc positions in Hanken School of Economics and Aalto University. This was the second round they interviewed the study participants. Being part of this research project and my participation in data collection are explicated in the chapter "research design".

The way interview questions were formulated enabled me to study HR managers' perception of HRM devolution. The interviews include questions like "*How the (tech-based) changes have affected the relationship between HR and line managers?*" or "*what are your ways of influence and/or sell new ideas to line managers?*". Through these questions, the discussion in some interviews moves also to changing relationships between subordinates and line managers. This means e.g. that the interviewee tells that line managers have sought help from HR professionals when they have faced questions how to treat employees equally in distance work policy questions. Originally, I was also interested of the relationship between employees and line managers. Since my interview material does not explicitly discuss this relationship like line manager – HR manager relationship, I felt wiser to leave this inquiry up to possible future research avenue.

The interview questions are strongly linked to my research questions, which aim to discover how HR managers picture line managers responsibilities to conduct HR tasks. Thus, my research is a classic example of emotionalist (subjectivist) approach to study: Aiming to map

participants emotions, perceptions and individual experience on organisational change (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, 79). This is done by searching for themes that give best description of my data. When talking about themes, I refer to patterns that are relevant in contrast to “*particular research question*” (Braun and Clarke, 2012, 58). Familiarizing myself with my data led me eventually to my two final research question:

1. In HR manager perspective, how devolvement of HR tasks shows in Finnish white-collar expert work?
2. How do emerging digital tools shape the role expectations of HR managers towards line managers?

### 3.2 Research design

My research design is based on 24 semi-structured interviews with Finnish HR Managers working with white-collar workers and line managers. My data *corpus*, all data collected for research project (Braun and Clarke 2006, 79) was of total 24 interviews. Eventually, I didn't use all interviews. Based on relevant findings relating to my research questions, the final number of utilized interviews was 13. This is called the *data set* (Ibid.) of which the actual analysis is done. Originally, the interviews are part of the research project called “Brave New HR”, and the interviews are conducted by Hertta Vuorenmaa (Aalto University) and Jennie Sumelius (University of Vaasa during interviews, currently at Hanken School of Economics). The interviewees have been part of the ongoing research project, and this was the second round of interviews. Thus, I am participating in a longitudinal interview study.

The interviewees differ in industrial context and company sizes. The represented industries include insurance, gaming, construction, retail and telecommunications. The company sizes vary between 30 to 10 000 employees. All interviewees have senior or C-suite level title, and they have been working in the industry for multiple years. All of them are HR managers and/or in responsibility of company HR. The interviews have been conducted in Finnish, and all the interviewees speak Finnish as their mother tongue. For the purposes of this thesis, I have translated quotes from interviews to English.

Not all the data corpus was relevant in my research aim. By this I mean that some of the interviews spoke more about e.g. employee well-being due transformation of work, legal/bureaucratical issues company HR faces or about how HR professionals work changes. To distinct those interviews that were most suitable for my study, I chose the ones where interviewees elaborated on the questions about the relationship between HR and line managers the most. This was done by first looking for codes assigned to each interview, and then selecting the interviews that accumulated the most codes around HR – line manager relationship. Later, I made “better safe than sorry” round of checking the interviews again. This means I went through my data corpus by searching words “esimies” and “keskijohto”, to make sure I had indeed found the interviews with most relevant data about HR-line manager relationship. This was done by the help of technology, since I utilized programme called “Atlas.ti” in my initial coding process.

This round of interviews focused specifically how technology changes work, the research question being *“how white-collar expert work is changing due to technology, and what the implications of these changes are for HRM research and practice?”* (Sumelius, Vuorenmaa, Gartner and Mäkelä, forthcoming). This research question is addressed in the interviews through the conceptual lens of three forms of disconnections – work from time, place and employment (Sumelius, et al., forthcoming). In a nutshell, disconnection of work and time refers to possibility to work with mobile technologies without any distinct regulated hours. Secondly, the disconnection between work and place refers to possibility to use mobile technologies for working independent of physical setting. The last disconnection, of work and employment, means the change in the job contracts towards entrepreneurial way of working.

### 3.3 Being part of the research project

In this section, I want to argue why I chose to utilize already existing qualitative data instead of conducting the interviews on my own. First, I was in a lucky position to familiarized myself to this data earlier. With the help of my position as a research assistant, I participated the research project “Brave New HR” in the early months of 2019. Then, my job was to code the 24 interviews using four theoretical lenses: Work disconnecting from time, work disconnecting from place, work disconnecting from employment and fourth, how the work itself changes with technology (Sumelius, et al., forthcoming). This enabled me to elaborate on questions that intrigued me already before my thesis project. Before starting the coding of data, we agreed

with Hertta Vuorenmaa that the data would be available for thesis project also. The coding process during spring 2019 included in-depth discussions with Hertta and Jennie Sumelius about the important themes emerging from the data. Although these themes weren't linked to my research problem, I feel that these discussions gave me assurance that I have interpreted the data "correctly". In other words, my perceptions of what HR managers speak of were in line with Hertta and Jennie. This discussion with other researchers with deep knowledge of the data set can be called "researcher triangulation" (Denzin, 1978, cited in Abdalla, et al., 2018). Researcher triangulation enables to obtain multiple perspectives in the research object as well as discussion about points of view of the subject matter, reducing possible biases (Abdalla, et al., 2018). To conclude, having pre-existing understanding of the data I am diving in to as well as assurance from the interviewers of the study participants, I felt comfortable to use these interviews to my thesis also.

### 3.4 Data analysis

In my analysis, I chose to follow thematic analysis (TA) approach. The aim focused on important themes occurring through data set rather than a phenomenon within a single data piece (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Braun and Clarke (Ibid.,) call this approach as "beginner-friendly". For example, discourse analysis requires more background knowledge of how language mirrors reality. Thematic analysis is "just" a method, not a theoretical approach in analysing data (Braun and Clarke, 2012).

In making thematic analysis, there are many active decisions a researcher must make (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2012). First question is whether to conduct analysis *inductively* or *theoretically*. This means the coding and theme-generating process can stem from the data itself, or from some existing theoretical frameworks. My approach for coding-process was inductive: I was searching all possible extracts that would illustrate what HR managers would expect from line managers in digitalized working context. However, the reality is that both inductive and theoretical approach are often used simultaneously (Braun and Clarke, 2012, 58). This means we "*always bring something to the data when we analyse it, and we rarely completely ignore the semantic content of the data..*" (Ibid.). The coding process started from inductive perspective but generating themes from codes was closely related to relevant

literature. The theme generating phase happened after extensive literature review, and HRM devolution literature had strong impact on the process.

Secondly, it is important to acknowledge the epistemological standpoint. In thematic analysis, one can opt between *essentialist(realist)* or *constructionist* standpoint (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The role of language plays a pivotal role (Ibid.,). In the former, language is seen as access to motivations, meaning and experience of the inquired person. In the latter, aim is to discover social context and structural conditions behind the speech (Ibid.,). As in my case, I would say this study belongs to essentialist side. This is because I am not trying to uncover why in certain contexts expectations between managers occur in different way, rather it is vice versa – trying to uncover which themes arise independent of organisational context.

Braun and Clarke (2006) also highlight the difference between *rich description* and *detailed account* of the data set. The first approach favours entailing multiple themes and as wide description of the data set as possible. The problem is that “*some depth and complexity is necessarily lost*” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 83), but the approach helps to stay in touch of the entire data set. Another approach, detailed account, aims to give nuanced view on one theme or group of themes around the topic. The expectations HR managers hold towards line managerial work entails multiple themes. Then, it felt natural to maintain *rich description* in my analysis. Thus, I thrive to create “*holistic understanding of the issues studied*” (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, 5) in my context.

My initial coding was data-driven, and I generated codes based on my own perceptions. These initial codes were though linked to Nadel’s role theory, where I combined the initial codes referring to either *nonrelational* or *relational* role expectations (Nadel, 1957). Looking now, this seems irrelevant phase in my coding and analysis process. By this I mean that the nonrelational and relational code categories had little effect on the final theme generation. The final themes were linked to HRM devolvment literature rather than to role theory.

One final decision in the process was about type of themes: should there be *semantic* or *latent* approach to them (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 84). The first one focuses more on explicit, surface level of what is said by the interviewees. First, an analyst must progress from *description* of the themes to evaluation, or *interpretation* (Ibid.,). This includes effort to evaluate the significance of different patterns emerging and to evaluating the broader meaning and implication of the

themes. The other approach is to go for *latent* theme level. This could be considered taking a step forward from semantic analysis, where an analyst tries to reveal “*underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations – and ideologies*” (Ibid.,) behind the semantic data. I feel strongly that my best option is to stay in semantic level of analysis. My goal is to reveal what kind of patterns emerge on HRM devolution in HR managers perspective. In other words, I am not trying to reveal *why* it is so. This could mean e.g. speculating on what organisational factors or societal factors contribute to certain kind of pattern in roles line managers are expected. As this is not the case, I focus on giving description of the main themes and afterwards attempt to evaluate what are the most significant themes arising from my data set.

### **Data analysis step by step**

The coding process utilized thematic analysis. I looked for examples which would tell about new technology in HR work as well as how digital era shapes the expectations towards line managers. This means that I was interested e.g. about HR platform called Workday and how it shapes the interaction between line managers and HR professionals. I also considered important to map the interactions *after* implementing new technology, like Workday. Thus, I wanted to look descriptions what has happened between middle managers and subordinates and/or HR with new technology. I hoped that the interviews would have revealed change in human interaction because of technological change.

Through the process, I had to abandon my original idea of comparing relationship before and after some technology is introduced. I learned that this was data-driven choice. My data represents current situation, and I didn't have longitudinal data on what has been before. Also, companies were in different stages of implementing digital choices. Introduction of digital HR solutions like Workday, or new performance appraisal system, were at a stage where the investment decision had been made but implementation would be in the future. Furthermore, it would've been very speculative to claim that a technology X has had causal effect on human interaction Y in this way. Thus, my scope specified to look HRM devolution in general with having digital era as background or landscape to explain the expectations of HR managers.

CAQDAS refers to computer-assisted qualitative data analysis which is considered useful especially in case of large amount of qualitative data (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008). When starting my thesis project in the autumn of 2019, I had 24 interviews at my disposal. As I had

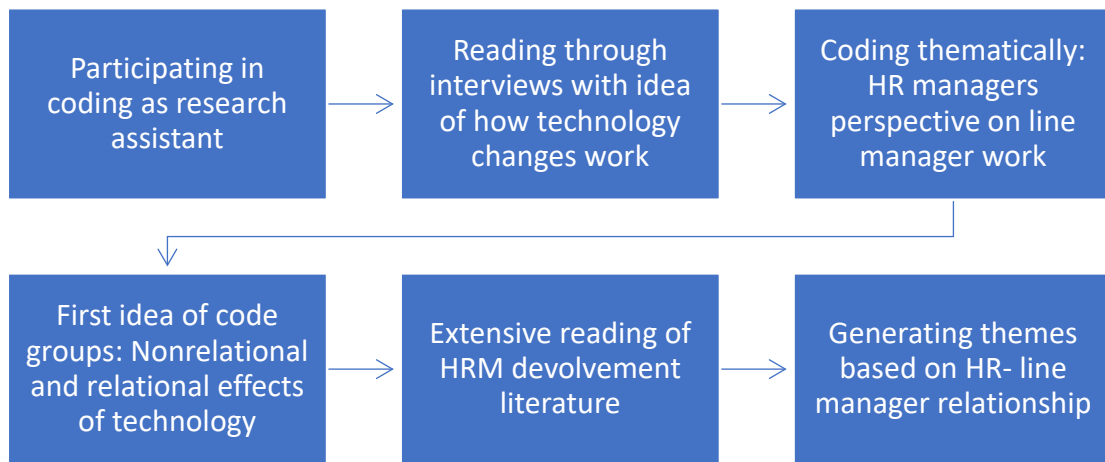
used Atlas.ti already in the spring 2019 when participating in the research project first time, I had all the interviews in the software. To me, it seemed most suitable to organize such of large amount of data with computer-aid. The most useful part of the software was seeing how many codes per interview I had used. It was easy to discard those interviews where there were only 1-2 codes assigned and include those where 4 or more codes were used. This gave me an idea which of the interviews included most speech about HR-line relationship. Furthermore, Atlas.ti was very useful in double-checking the interviews to make sure I had spotted relevant information in contrast to my research questions.

My initial codes aimed to find patterns describing line managers work in digital era. Examples of these codes included equality, frequency of interaction, growth in managerial responsibility, HR tool, instant feedback, leading from distance, leading through goals, managing diverse situations, searching help from HR, technology changes work, technology changing leadership, trust and Workday. These number of these original codes was 23. Some codes were erased during the process when I noticed general patterns emerging. For example, my initial codes of “changing responsibilities between manager and subordinate” and “changing dependencies” further developed to two: “Growth in employee power” and “Growth in managerial responsibility”. Also, the code “access to data” was merged with the code “transparency”.

The final themes were based on HR practises that HR managers perceived being devolved as well as the role of digital solutions in HRM devolution. These themes were strongly influenced by HRM devolution literature. Thus, the theme generation process can be seen more theory-driven than my data-driven coding process.



In the figure below, I explicit how my research process has evolved from initial familiarizing with data to final theme generation:



*Figure 2: From initial codes to final themes*

### 3.5 Ethical considerations of the thesis

To end the chapter, I want to highlight the ethical considerations I have taken through the research process. There are multiple academic ethical guidelines to help novice researcher. I will assess the ethics of this research based on Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, 70-75) of what they think should be important to consider. First, I trust that the study participants are in on a voluntary basis. My data is produced by two professional academics. The interviewers have also ensured the informed consent. The participants know they are participating in “Brave New HR” research project with multiple rounds of interviews. I have ensured the anonymity of study participants by leaving all names of participants as well as their employers out. When some interviewee has used names, those names are assigned “xx” in quoted extracts to ensure anonymity. The study participants are simply assigned with a number. Also, the interviewers have clearly committed themselves to anonymity and confidentiality of the material. This was evident from the material, when the other interviewer asked for permission to create a case example. The interviewee agreed and added that it is no harm if the company name comes up. The interviewer quickly replied that she never compromises the anonymity of study participants, even here when the permission for name was granted.

To best of my knowledge, I have respected the research done before me by including literature regarding digitalization, leadership, role theory and HRM devolution to my thesis. Direct quotes from original sources are used only when the essential idea of the concept cannot be rephrased well enough. Direct quotes are marked with “ “ – signs as well as using italics in the text.

#### 4. Findings

As presented in the literature review, role expectations (Biddle, 1979;1986) is the theoretical framework applied to this thesis. My findings consist of empirical material on norms, preferences and beliefs (Biddle, 1986, 75) HR managers hold towards line managers. To remind of the vocabulary, norms refer to privately held thoughts of what HR managers expect should be done, like *she shouldn't smoke that much*. Preferences refer to liked or disliked characteristics of certain phenomenon, like *I don't like salty food*. Beliefs, then are privately held perceptions *I think there are no gays in team sports* (Biddle, 1979, 131).

First, I will introduce two HR practises that were commonly perceived as devolved to line managers in Finnish study context. First, HR managers expect line managers great responsibility in building remote work policy. The findings around remote work introduce the role of trust in successful remote work policy formation. This section also sheds light on “double burden” of expectations HR managers set to line managers. This means ability to lead from distance as well as allowing subordinates a lot of room to decide when, where and how to conduct the work.

Secondly, line managers are called to take great responsibility in goal setting and rewarding. New performance appraisal systems as well as support HR offers for line managers, are discussed. Unlike in remote work policy, HR managers are more willing to accept that introducing new performance appraisal systems requires training and time with line managers. Adding to these two practices, HR managers perception about responsibility of workers well-being at work is discussed.

The third part of this section focuses on the effect of digital solutions to HR-line management relationship. The evidence shows that communicating through virtual channels is becoming more frequent in some HR tasks, for instance, in legal and bureaucratic issues. After introduction of these virtual communication channels, the role of digital HR platforms as disrupting the roles between HR and line managers, is discussed.

## 4.1 Line managers' role in HR tasks

### 4.1.1 Remote work policy maker

HR managers spoke a lot about flexible work arrangements (e.g. Williams, 2019), and especially about remote work. Depending on work culture, industry tradition and success of remote work solutions, the way remote work was organized varied a lot. Some companies were more liberate towards how much remote work is allowed. At the same time, especially in traditional sectors like manufacturing or wood industry, there seemed to be lot of headache about organizing remote work. The technological possibilities per se were not the problem. Instead, the work culture was the corner stone in successful remote work policy. The interviewed HR managers brought up trust as important mediating factor in building this culture. Also, there were especially questions relating to equality: How much white-collar workers could work outside of office when most of the company's workforce was blue-collar? This of course means that blue-collar workers don't have the same possibility to conduct remote work independent of place and time, which might cause troubles and inequality.

One thing seems to be in common, though. Line managers seemed to be the ultimate remote work policy makers. Through the interviews, most of HR managers spoke about how remote work policy should be approached in unit or team-level. This approach means that team or unit head, line manager, is the decision maker. There might be some kind of company policies which line managers must follow. In the bigger picture, those guidelines worked though only as broad framework where there's a lot room for line manager to decide. Stricter guidelines seemed only to be necessary when there had occurred abuses. Following quotes illustrate the case:

*"..we have agreed that in teams, a line manager can assess what is necessary considering the task and work community, how much is needed to be physically there. Some have agreed that e.g. Friday cannot be a remote workday..or Tuesday or some other day is meeting-free day when everyone is here.. but they all depend on the unit"* – HR manager 4

*"We have a remote work policy which enables people to work from home but there has agreement on general terms. (These terms) have been taken into action because line managers*

*allowed different things (to different people) so we needed to ensure equal treatment for everyone” – HR manager 12*

It seems that remote work carries a double burden for line managers. This was evident from discontent of HR managers about line managers’ skill to lead from distance. HR managers seem to be offended by how some line managers unfulfilled responsibility to lead subordinates. In other words, HR managers described experiences of using remote work as an excuse for “laissez-faire” leadership. Thus, it seems that HR managers expect line managers to be capable of “juggling on the line”. This means line manager should be capable of creating flexible policy to make it possible to work independent of place and time, while at the same time lead from distance effectively.

*“... And also how line managers approach when there is no contact.. you can’t just say that “I call some time”, can’t work that way” – HR manager 9*

*“..You of course should contact a person whether he is here or not so you are informed of the how he feels and what he works on.. some line manager can be actually satisfied when you don’t have to manage when people are not under one’s eyes and this might lead to burnout or free riding..” – HR manager 4*

*“Maybe there has been more challenging done by workers that why my job can’t be done from elsewhere. And then, line managers have to really think that, why not. Is it just own need of controlling... like going there on Monday to say hello to xx and xx and then greet xx and xx that I was here and feel like I have done my line managerial job..” – HR manager 1*

*“On the other hand, especially in line managerial work, there’s still that engineer thinking behind.. in that case when you don’t have your team grouped nicely when it’s needed you grab the phone or organize discussion around other than busy things, to have that happening, it challenges” – HR manager 3*

The previous excerpts suggest that HR managers have high demands towards line managers. The tone of HR managers implies that line managers should be able to handle remote work issue on their own without much help from HR professionals. There was little evidence that

line managers would've been offered any training to handle remote work policy making. Ideas to help line managers in leading remotely working subordinates were rare, but there were some:

*"Of course, this is a theme of which we talk about in leadership development... We have quite many line managers also here in Finland who have subordinates in other countries and e.g. this virtual leadership is important and what to take into consideration around it"* – HR manager 3

How, then, can line managers be successful in organizing remote work policy? Trust is a theme which HR managers bring up as a mediating factor. Trust is seen as something line managers build between them and their team, dictating the success of leading from distance. HR managers see that line managers set the tone whether subordinates feel comfortable with working remotely or not. Technology or technical tools will not dictate the success of remote work policy making. Satisfaction to remote work depends on the culture line managers have built, if you ask HR managers. Thus, it can be said that building good relationship with subordinates and taking care that there is mutual trust are key success factors line managers should take care of. One HR manager describes her experience of the role of trust. She had wondered why in some teams people were satisfied with remote work, while in others not. The possibilities to conduct remote work were the same:

*"..One of my employees (team-members) had decided in the middle of all hassle to shut down her Skype, so that people see she is not available (online) and she can focus on task that requires concentration. And.. she had been happily working in closed environment and had kept Skype closed. And then, a colleague from another team comes to door and peaks in asking 'oh, you are here'. And my team member replied that 'I am here to make annual head count plan and it requires a little bit concentration... And this other person replied that 'Okay, well I won't bother you, but aren't you afraid that your line manager thinks you are not working?' (Interviewee laughs).*

*"Often people speak whether a line manager can trust subordinate that things get done but I always bring up the other side that can a worker trust that a line manager trust subordinate to get the things done..."* HR manager 1

There were also comments acknowledging the role of subordinates in building functioning remote work policy. Ultimately, if subordinate isn't worth of trust, it might have consequences:

*"..First question about (remote work) functioning is about trust by both sides in the team, it's in core. Whether you have a monster line manager who closely examines, or you have lazy subordinates that won't do the work, it won't work"* – HR manager 11

*" Interviewer: Have you used any tracking methods?*

*Interviewee: We haven't. Maybe it would feel too much like patronizing.. We trust on people, and if we together make rules, people follow them.. and behind is the fact that if you choose not to follow, then it is over and you have to sit at workplace... and trust, it is based on trust this thing"* - HR manager 9

Like the first example about the role of trust illustrated, line managers' role in building working culture has a great effect on satisfaction about remote work policy. Even though this study focuses to Finnish context, it is worth showing that the building of trust can be culturally mediated. One interviewee described his experience in German context, where the idea of working revolves still much around the physical place:

*"Well, first of all there are two options culture-wise: If you don't see someone sitting at the desk, you can think 'Well now he is really working!' or you can think 'what the heck he does when he is not sitting there at his bench.. In Finland our work compasses a lot of travelling and meetings, and when I think of my team, I never expect anyone to be present when entering our collective workspace.. In Germany, it seems to be that work culture means more individual and literate doing, and the experience is formed so that if the person isn't there and if you don't know where he is, you think he most certainly isn't working!"* – HR manager 12

Overall, the work culture seemed to be the key in successful remote work policy. HR managers feel that if line manager is controlling or cannot trust that a subordinate does work remotely, the system doesn't work. Line managers, then, need to have ability to trust employees working outside of office while at the same time maintaining contact with them. This sets high expectations towards line managers. HR managers described line managers to be ultimate

decision makers relating to remote work policy. There could be some company guidelines about remote work, although only as a broad framework to build suitable policy in team or unit level.

#### 4.1.2 In charge of goal setting and rewarding

Interviewees see goal setting and rewarding as devolved HR practice. As discussed in the previous chapter, HR managers expect line managers to be able to build work culture where remote work is conducted in trusting atmosphere. Remote work doesn't function if line managers can't set clear goals for their team, and this is discussed at this section.

The possibility to work remotely has implications for leadership requirements (e.g. Schwarzmüller, et al., 2018). By remote work, it is becoming increasingly harder to see where or when a white-collar, expert worker conducts the work. When a team isn't at physical presence of a line manager, skills to stay on track about what subordinates are working on becomes crucial. Thus, HR managers speak about goal setting and rewarding to be one of the key skills of line managers in digital era. HR managers expect line managers skills to track progress and to balance the workload of the subordinate:

*".. It's really much up to line manager to maintain regular interaction.... It doesn't matter whether the person is physically present or not, you have to be aware of subordinate's workload and work content..."* -HR manager 4

*"And one thing this work independent of time and place causes is the fact how well line managers set goals and then lead their subordinates by tracking progress, and this is big disruption.."* - HR manager 8

As discussed earlier in this paper, digital revolution might affect HRM devolution strongly in upcoming years (Isari, et al., 2019; Intindola, et al., 2017). This is especially noticeable in rewarding – virtual platforms enable more real-time tracking of the goals. The process of setting goals, iterating them and appreciating performance becomes more cyclical in nature. Virtual platforms enable tracking goals, e.g. sales numbers, in accessible way for line managers. The digital aspect in rewarding is seen positive for line managers. HR platform called Workday is especially relevant what comes to goal setting and rewarding. The role of Workday as shaping



expectations between HR and line management is further discussed later in the findings section. In goal setting context, Workday is seen as very positive development in performance appraisal. HR managers see that real-time appreciation of performance comes easier:

*“Everything is mobile – you can do request for salary increase and we have a model for instant rewarding, spot rewarding” – HR manager 6*

*“Workday (platform) is mobile and they are struck that they can look their head count and approve subordinate’s issues and compensation data..” – HR manager 5*

*“Dashboards are like.. if I think from line managers perspective, the system suggests.. I can see how my salaries compare and how have I acknowledged different people through the years e.g. by comparing their performance to their salary developments it gives (something like this) automatically” -HR manager 13*

The way that line managers conduct their work changes because of new performance appraisal systems. This means both handling new ways of working with digital platforms, as well as unlearning old habits of setting goals. This is acknowledged by the HR managers. In some companies, HR has recognized the lacking skills of line managers and need to train for this new reality. Compared to remote work policy making, it seems that HR managers understand more readily that the change takes time. When speaking of remote work, HR managers didn’t bring up possible negative aspects which remote work policy making might cause for line managers. In goal setting and rewarding, the case is different. HR managers acknowledge that the development seems to require a lot of capacity from line managers to adapt, adding another tool that line managers should handle in their people management skills. HR managers expect that line managers will become capable of handling goal setting while recognizing that it requires training and time:

*“..There, we have goals to almost all workers who should have (them), and it (system implementation) has begun smoothly but there are many phases: First goal setting, half-year appreciation.. And then you should take a look at goals when there’s one to one meeting, where you look of the progress.. To get this as a way of practice, it takes years to ground to organisation”.. – HR manager 8*

*“We implemented a system for goal setting two years ago and after two years of practise, we know that line managers’ capabilities vary quite a lot...when the trend is that more and more workers themselves control their working hours, it is first and foremost the performance you (line manager) should track and if it isn’t systematic, there will be unclear situations” – HR Manager 8*

*“..Changing way of working. For example, when a new reward system is implemented or what is the criteria for performance appraisal, these are the things that have brought tensions. They (different systems) tend to get complicated... they are not easy for line managers.. and you can see frustration like ‘is this really necessary to implement this’. -HR manager 9*

Thus, it seems that HR managers understand that getting line managers on board in implementing new goal setting systems, is vital. HR managers recognize that change doesn’t happen overnight, rather it may take years to ground to organisation. It can be said that in remote work policy making, line managers are expected to handle greater responsibility to make it work. In goal setting and rewarding, HR managers acknowledge that they need to support line managers more.

#### *Managing work well-being of employees*

Interlinked to both remote work and tracking goals is the theme of work well-being of employees. HR managers see that line managers have a strong responsibility to be “on the map” about how their subordinates feel or how much they work. This requires skills to keep regularly in touch with one’s subordinates. In remote work policy setting, HR managers displayed annoyance when they had experience that a line manager doesn’t fulfil the responsibility of leading people working remotely. Leading from distance can be very challenging, as acknowledged by a HR manager below.

*“You have to contact people whether they are here or not to know how she is, does she have capacity, what’s on her desk and take responsibility of regular meetings and one-to-one discussions.. (If) the role of line manager doesn’t feel like it, one can be even satisfied when people are not around, and you don’t have to take care of them and this might lead to burnout..” – HR manager 4*

*“It would be great if line manager could do it.. Like I did with my own subordinates during project. That I see, ‘hey, you have done during weekend this (project) and have a look when you can leave earlier and take a time off’ ... But of course, like in my team, people are all over the world. So, I can’t even see how they do their work. It can be challenging for line manager, monitoring how much actually a person has done work’ – HR manager 10*

This first part of findings has focused on my first research question, inquiring how line managers participate in devolved HR tasks. HR managers bring up flexible work arrangements - FWAs (Williams, 2019) in the form of remote work policy as devolved task for line managers. Also, goal setting and rewarding (Tyskbo, 2020) earns a lot of attention. Next, I will move on to my second research question. The effort is to map how HR managers perceive their relationship with line managers. Specific focus is given to new digital tools and platforms that might shape this relationship.

#### 4.2 Relationship between HR and line managers

HR – line manager relationship in my empirical material follows the pattern which has been recognized in the literature already over decade ago (e.g. Renwick, 2003; Whittaker and Marchington, 2003). HR professionals expect line managers to be the active decision-makers in people management, while they stay in the background:

*“Definitely to be a backbone for line managers, I sometimes use the word “background devil” – HR Manager 1*

*“....we are all the ‘at one’s skin’ to support and help and often times it turns out that you’re either in and grateful of the support, or if the case is that you are unwilling to change the situation gets quite heated up (laughing) so that you find something else..” - HR manager 3*

HR managers expect line managers to be proactive and mindful about the type of support they need from HR. HR managers suppose that line managers know when they should approach HR to ask help. There are even signs of irritation from HR managers, as one interviewee told that “maybe line managers have required more support and even searched for it sometimes too much..”. One HR manager painted an image of HR as service provider, where line manager is

like a customer coming to desk in search of help. This implies that HR managers have high expectations towards line managers. First, a line manager should be the active participant, as well as know what is needed from HR.

*“But, maybe the relationship between line managers and HR has moved to state where you come when need of HR service...in whatever, how do I recruit, can I increase salary what can I do when I have challenging subordinate etc.” -HR Manager 2*

*“Maybe line managers have required more support and even searched for it sometimes too much.. It can be new and funny to decide ‘Do I really have to grant permission to work from somewhere else’..After all, I don’t decide it.. it’s up to nature of the function.. and about line manager” – HR manager 1*

The more interesting part of the perceived relationship with line managers is the role digital tools play. These development is introduced in the following section. First, the way HR communicates with line managers, seems to be disrupting. Also, new digital platforms such as Workday, might alter the responsibilities between HR and line management.

#### 4.2.1 Virtual communication and digital platforms

Very distinct phenomenon evident from the data was the role technology played in HR’s supportive role. There were two main categories arising from the data: virtual channels, and HR platform Workday. First, I will discuss the type of channels HR managers see as communication channels with line managers. After discussing them, I will move on to role of digital platforms as shaping expectations between HR and line management.

In some matters, companies have opted for algorithms to help line managers in HR issues. In other words, HR managers see that technology could answer some questions about HR tasks without the need of HR professional being present. Again, this implies growing decision power for line managers with limited support from HR. This development was especially evident in the discussion about remote work policy. Legal and bureaucratic issue came to fore when speaking of algorithm-based help from HR.

*“We have launched an Ask HR- channel through which line managers will get most quickly the answer if you have employment issues or similar -HR manager 2*

*“We have a chatbot called Auli, it is our work juridical robot..It is now in function and our line managers can use it.. You can ask anything regarding to holidays or family leaves” - HR manager 4*

In some cases, there was still a human at the other end of the screen, but these solutions also underlined the development that support from HR should be searched through digital channels. One interviewee spoke about chat system and getting rid of mail-based system. The company had moved instead of email to “ticket system” where line managers order a service from HR department. Thus, digital channels can enforce the perception of HR managers that they work as service providers for line managers.

*“Like we have centralized the work of administration to some unit, at the beginning of the year we opened mail called Yksiluukku and there you can post all worries considering line managerial work..” -HR manager 4*

The mindset of HR managers about digital tools was one interesting aspect. Line managers are called to take responsibility of things strongly even when the change is clearly originated from HR department. The HR platform called Workday seems to disrupt the routine responsibilities between HR and line managers. HR managers expect Workday being first and foremost line managers’ tool. There were other platforms discussed, too. In one company, the future would bring a platform for tracking employee work well-being. In the company, HR manager expects line managers to better take care of their subordinates with the help of the platform.

*“No no, it is specifically line managers’ tool.. and there’s no way we want to call it HR tool, because we want line managers to take ownership over it” -HR manager 6*

*“..How to make the system seamless in the eye of the main admin, who often is the line manager..” - HR manager 7*

*“At the moment, we are building system about employees’ working ability of which idea is that it combines data from occupational health care and from other sources as base for leading with data. And it will be a tool for line managers, where she can see her team’s working health in real time, helping in management” – HR manager 8*

Workday has many mechanisms how it affects relationship between line managers and HR. HR tasks that have before being scattered between line managers and HR are now in one place. Platforms such as Workday allow tracking employee life-cycle in accessible way. Workday includes functionalities which HR managers see increasing devolvement. This means e.g. that line managers are expected to handle recruiting themselves through the platform, without need of HR participating in the process. It seems that centralizing HR activities to one, digital platform, accelerates the devolution development. Line managers take especially tasks that have belonged to HR administrative staff, and visibility of employee life-cycle in the system requires line managers to adapt new skills.

*“Well, Workday causes HR roles to renew because line managers themselves do things in the system much more, and the HR role changes significantly and this is of course little bit scary because when I think of HR admin specialists...how on earth there are so many of them when the system and line managers do their work”. -HR manager 5*

*“Now there’s basic compensation and recruiting. Next, there will be salary planning, salary raises. Later, the system will include talent, succession planning... and all learning.” – HR manager 6*

*“I have had five or six different systems.. Of course, it helps that you can see your team as a whole, with salaries, feedback and recruiting in the same place. It is (good) for line manager and the system is very mobile and when people are working in the field, of course it helps”- HR manager 13*

Eagerness to implement Workday was evident in those companies that are in the middle of process of doing it. HR managers displayed a lot of enthusiasm about new digital platforms. The expectation of how line managers receive the platform, seemed to be very positive. HR managers way of speaking implies they expect line managers to have a change-positive and resilient mindset towards implementing Workday.

*“Workday (platform) is mobile and they are struck that they can look their head count and approve subordinate’s issues and compensation data..” – HR manager 5*

*“When you think how many we are it is a big number. And the feedback has been very positive. Like, line managers, nobody has given any negative feedback. The only thing they bring up is that ‘hey when we get travel bills here’ ... It is the main issue that they would like to have more functions than there already is” - HR manager 6*

The challenges when calling for line managers to bare greater responsibility in HR activities were also acknowledged. Those voices were, though, far and few compared to those who just emphasized the positive sides of digital platforms. However, some interviews did bring up possible issues. There were at least thoughts on how line managers workload increases, which might mean rising change resistance. Even though the system itself wouldn’t necessarily be too hard to learn, the mindset of line managers might be change-preventive. One HR manager mentioned that when line managers feel that there is too much going on, they might feel annoyed.

Dynamics between line managers and HR are affected by the new platforms. Line managers may be required to conduct work that HR has done before. One HR manager illustrated the case by telling that line managers have asked her “do they anymore do anything in HR nowadays?”.

*“..In practice, if it’s just a HR push project, most part of the organisation is rejecting the change...because change often means that line managers’ workload increases, and they resist and are like ‘could you stop developing new things for a moment and dumping new things to us’.” - HR manager 9*

Overall, line managers were expected to take more responsibility of HR tasks when digital platforms emerge. The tasks that HR admin specialists have conducted before would become line managers’ tasks. When multiple HR activities are concentrated to same platform, line managers are expected to take care of employee life-cycle when data helps leading directly and in real time (Isari, et al., 2019; Intindola, et al., 2017).

### 4.3 Summary of the findings section

In my study context, remote work policy is a HR practice perceived to be devolved to line managers. Common seems to be practise that company has a guideline how to arrange remote work, but line managers have a lot of individual decision power within to decide on what suits best in team or unit-level. HR managers perceived that line managers are capable handling remote work policy on their own. The expectation held by HR professionals comprised a “double burden”. Line managers should be capable in making a policy where there is individual room to decide where and when to work, while leading from distance at the same time. HR managers showed irritation about line managers who displayed “laissez-faire” type of leadership when subordinates weren’t at physical presence.

To succeed in remote work policy making, HR managers felt that line managers should build a trusting working culture. Building a work culture where employees “should be able to trust that their manager trusts them” was key to success. One issue is the frustration considering line managers’ need to search for support in decisions about remote work. This is linked to HR’s managers perceived role as supporting function. HR managers framed themselves not as the decision makers, rather as advisers for line managers.

Among remote work policy making, setting goals and tracking accomplishment of those goals was perceived belonging to line managers. Some companies had introduced new goal setting systems. HR managers pictured a big responsibility for line managers when new digital platforms, such as Workday, emerge. These platforms allow new ways of rewarding, such as real-time “spot rewarding”. Also, HR managers expected line managers to participate to goal setting in more cyclical nature. This means line managers’ ability to follow closely how well goals are met, and to iterate those goals if needed. On the other hand, interviewed HR managers recognized that setting functionable goal setting policy “may take years to ground to organisation”. Thus, HR managers expected in remote work policy making more individual capabilities from line managers. In building goal setting systems, HR managers recognized that line managers need to be trained, and new skills have to be patiently built with the help of HR.

Work well-being of employees was acknowledged as part of remote work and goal setting. HR managers perceived that line manager shouldn’t forget to stay in touch with team members. If line manager doesn’t take care of employee, it might lead to working too much and to burnout.



At the same time, one HR manager admitted that it is hard to stay on track what subordinates are working on.

What comes to relationship between HR and line management, supportive role of HR was recognized (e.g. Larsen & Brewster, 2003). Line managers are in the charge of people management decisions, but HR works as “background devil”, as one interviewee put it. This implies that HR managers expect line managers to know what they need from HR, as well as to be active participant in search of help. In some cases, algorithm-based solutions were introduced to help line managers. These digital channels might increase line managers’ decision power in HR issues even more, as the amount of contact with HR department decreases. Chatbot called “Auli” was an example of line manager communicating with robot in legal issues. Also, one HR manager stressed how line managers should come and ask about services they need from HR.

Besides communicating digitally, digital platforms like Workday are disrupting the relationship between HR and line managers. This means that some tasks formerly belonging to HR are now line managerial tasks. Digital platforms enable multiple HR practises to be handled in one place. An example could recruiting, rewarding and head count planning done via Workday. This have caused tensions in some companies. E.g. in some Asian cultures, line managers have felt that their status has been violated when they do tasks that formerly HR did. Also, line managers might think that HR pushes their responsibilities to line managers or “don’t do their job”-.

Interviewed HR managers displayed enthusiasm about implementing digital platforms. There were comments that line managers wished even more functionalities to use in Workday. Thus, these comments suggested that HR managers perceive line managers to have positive attitude towards implementing digital platforms. This further implies that HR managers expect line managers to have technology-positive and resilient attitude towards new ideas coming from HR.

## 5. Conclusions

Scholars have struggled to include technology into studies in the field of organizations and management (Zammuto, et al., 2007; Orlikowski and Scott, 2008). There are multiple reasons for the current situation. For example, organisational scholars' typical educational background and limited knowledge on technology play significance (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008, 435). Likewise, literature on the intersection of leadership and digitalization has started to grow only during last five years (Cortellazzo, et al., 2019). In HRM devolution perspective, many areas such as perceived role stress and successful organizational contingencies for devolvment have been inquired. Also, the supportive role of HR is addressed in studies. However, there are limited amount of studies considering which HR practices are devolved (Tyskbo, 2020; Intindola et al., 2017). Also, the role of technology in HR-line manager relationship has not generated yet much studies (see e.g. Isari, et al., 2020; Intindola, et al., 2017). These current research gaps may cause HR practitioners problems to understand how digitalization should be considered when planning to devolve HR activities. Secondly, contextualized understanding of specific HR practises might become useful when planning HR work for line managers. When HR practices are bundled to single HR system, contextualized understanding how HR tasks are conducted in practice might be lost (Tyskbo, 2020). Thirdly, organisational scholars might benefit from understanding that technology is undertheorized area in organisational research.

This thesis tries to create new body of material regarding what are the actual HR tasks that devolve to line managers. Furthermore, the effort of this thesis is to capture what is the role of HR managers play in successful devolvment process. The inspection of the relationship between HR and line management has specifically focused on the role of digital tools. Next, I will conclude this thesis by mirroring my findings to research done before in the areas of digitalization and leadership, technology and organizing and HRM devolution. At the same time, I summarize key findings relating to my research questions:

1. In HR manager perspective, how devolvment of HR tasks shows in Finnish white-collar expert work?
2. How do emerging digital tools shape the role expectations of HR managers towards line managers?

The findings from this thesis are in line with the previous studies about leadership requirements in digital era (e.g. Schwarzmüller, et al., 2018; Cascio and Montealegre, 2016; Cortellazzo, et al., 2019). The expectations of HR managers highlight the renaissance of technical skills (Cortellazzo, et al., 2019, 5). In my study, line managers were expected to learn new digital performance management systems. Furthermore, digital platforms such as Workday require line managers to master new, cloud-based smart technologies (Isari, et al., 2019). Remote work was one of the key themes of this thesis. When employees work independent of place and time, maintaining contact virtually with subordinates was acknowledged by HR managers. Leading from distance was one of the main concerns HR managers brought up as critical skills for a line manager in digital era (Schwarzmüller, et al., 2018). Leading people physically not present requires line managers ability in relational skills (Schwarzmüller, et al., 2018). Likewise, introduction of new digital tools create ambiguity which leaders in digital era have to cope with (Cascio and Montealegre, 2016).

Secondly, one of the themes in this thesis has been the role of technology in organizational literature. Studies of technology's role in organizing can be separated to two (Leonardi and Barley, 2008). Determinist scholars treat technology as contingent force to which every organization has to adjust. On the other hand, idealist scholars favour the view that human action and social norms, ideas and values determine how technology is utilized in organizations. This thesis is an effort to balance between these two, often opposite views. Barley (2015, 6), describes this balance the best in his call for studies with *"constructionist concern with concrete, while linking situated action to meso-level, if not more molar, changes in organizations and occupations"*. Like Zammuto et al. (2007, 752-753) suggest, *"one cannot talk about complex technology without reference to the social setting, just as it makes limited sense to talk about a door handle without discussing the people opening the open doors"*. In this thesis, people opening the doors are the company line managers and HR managers. Next, this role of technology in relationship between HR and line managers is concluded.

HRM devolution is a process that alters the way line managers work dramatically. My findings support the earlier studies of Williams (2019) and McCarthy, et al. (2010) about line managers role in policy maker in FWAs – flexible work arrangements. Like McCarthy, et al. (2010) suggested, line managers should be given room to work with arranging flexible work policy. This was evident in my findings – HR managers emphasized that loose organisational level guidelines for remote work existed, but line managers had the final decision power about

FWAs. However, problematic might be the view of HR managers that line managers seek “too much support”. HR managers in this study displayed little attention to training of line managers in FWAs. This reluctance to support line managers is suggesting that the support of HR is limited in flexible work arrangements.

McCarthy, et al.’s (2010) study focused on the role of line managers in Work-Life Balance (WLB) policy devolvment. They argued that to make WLB policy devolvment successful, emphasising positive organisational outcomes of WLBs is important. Secondly, awareness of company WLB policies and programs helps engaging line managers in WLB practice. The findings of this thesis imply that companies could benefit from motivating more line managers by offering organisational support for line manages. Previously, Op de Beeck, et al. (2016) suggested that interpersonal factors such as trust and good relationship between HR and line managers didn’t have significant effect on degree of HR devolution perceptions between two parties. In this study, though, trust seems to be significant factor in building functionable remote work policy.

Goal setting and performance appraisal earned a lot of HR managers attention. In this study, HR managers set many expectations for line managers. Interviewees emphasized the need to track workload, work content and to set motivating goals. Tracking goals included the aspect of taking care of employees’ well-being by line managers. HR managers felt that keeping regular contact with one’s subordinates as well as being aware of subordinates’ current work content is the responsibility of a good line manager. Company performance management as well as reward systems, were also discussed by HR managers. In Tyskbo’s (2020) study, one of the key problems with functionable performance appraisal was limited resources allocated to the process. Furthermore, performance appraisal wasn’t given as high priority by line managers as HR managers had hoped for (Ibid.,). In this thesis, it recognizable that HR managers are interested to allocate time and resources to successful implementation of performance appraisal systems. The need to train as well as support line managers in learning proper goal setting as well as new reward systems, was acknowledged. This is in contrast with remote work policy discussed before, where line managers are expected to do a lot on their own.

HR managers supportive role is recognized in HRM literature (Larsen & Brewster, 2003; Renwick, 2003; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). My empirical data supports previous

literature as HR managers emphasized this development in the interviews. The roles of “advisor” or “service provider” suggested by Nehles, et al. (2006) are evident from the accounts of HR managers. HR managers saw that line managers are capable to make decisions on their own. Even irritation about searching help from HR was evident from the data. Line managers are expected to have proactive grip on HR tasks they conduct. HR managers seemed to assume line managers know what kind of support is needed from HR.

Whittaker and Marchington (2003, 259) call for “*value of personal touch and interpersonal relations*”. One fact emerging from the data was that algorithms or robots have become part in HR’s supportive role. Chatbots or ticketing systems imply that line managers don’t necessarily interact with HR, but with algorithms in certain HR areas.

The importance of role clarity and possible discrepancies between HR and line managers in perceptions about degree of devolution is recognized by scholars (Op de Beeck, et al., 2016; Gilbert, et al., 2011; Maxwell and Watson, 2006; Intindola, et al., 2017). This discrepancy is estimated to be the most prevalent individual level factor to affect success of devolution (Intindola, 2017, 1805). There could be possible discrepancies in perception of devolution about new digital tools introduced by HR. Most HR managers speaking of these technological systems focused only on the positive sides of the development. One HR manager, for instance, commented that line managers have only hoped more functionalities to Workday. Other comments included line managers to be positively “struck”, or feedback being “super positive” regarding implementation of Workday. The comments of HR managers implied that line managers are expected to have positive and change-resilient mindset towards new digital solutions. However, the onboarding of new HR system might be much more problematic. Some HR managers acknowledged this, telling that line managers have displayed change resistance or annoyance when there is “too much going on”. The findings from this line are in line with Maxwell and Watson’s (2006) study finding that HR managers often perceive the extent of devolution larger than line managers.

HR platforms like Workday and their effect on speed of devolvment is new area on which study sheds light on. These platforms enable line managers to directly lead their employees, as study of Isari, et al. (2019) suggested. Workday enables to manage employee life-cycle. This means that functions like compensation, recruiting, employee sick-leaves, feedback and goal setting can be found from one system. Many HR managers implied that this means more work

for line managers. As one interviewee put it, HR admin specialist work is becoming increasingly scarce when these tasks are conducted by line managers. Others emphasized the functionalities which new platforms offer for line managers. One observation was that line managers can now accept their subordinates' requests through Workday. Also, one example of the development was that cyclical rewarding, called spot-rewarding, can be done via system. Workday isn't only technological tool that affects HR responsibilities of line managers. One interviewee commented on system which would enable line manager to see real-time data on sick leaves.

In Isari et al. (2019, 56) study, the authors concluded by stating that "*only a minority of respondents suggest the possibility of a higher line managers' involvement in people management practices*". They further suggest that the more innovative and pioneering HR professionals are, the more they be able to implement tailor-made arrangements due to digital transformation (Ibid.,). In my data, this seems to be the other way around. For example, the findings suggested that HR professionals are more than happy to give responsibility of building remote work policy to line managers. It will be interesting to see how digital solutions shape the relationship between HR and line management in near future. One thing is for sure: Devolution of HR tasks continues. The direction and speed are unknown.

### 5.1 Limitations and further research avenues

Like many of HR devolvement studies, my study is based on a single-participant approach. This means joining studies focusing on accounts of HR professionals (e.g. Renwick, 2003; Kulik and Perry, 2008). There has been a call for studies that acknowledge the dyadic nature of the phenomenon, including both line managers and HR professionals to study participants (Tyskbo, 2020, Intindola et al. 2017). Further research is needed in several areas of HRM devolution. First, longitudinal data where it's possible to track evolution of digital solutions and the way work is conducted, is required instead of cross-sectional data. In my study context, it would be intriguing to have another round of interviews where digital solutions have been implemented. In the time of the study, interviewed HR managers and companies were at pre-implementing or early launch stage with digital platforms such as Workday.

## 6. References

- Abdalla, M. M., Oliveira, L. G. L., Azevedo, C. E. F., and Gonzalez, R. K. 2018. Quality in qualitative organizational research: Types of triangulation as a methodological alternative. *Administração: Ensino e Pesquisa*, 19(1), 66-98.
- Avolio, B. J., Kahai, S., and Dodge, G. E., 2000. E-leadership: Implications for theory, research, and practice. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 11(4), 615-668.
- Avolio, B. J., Sosik, J. J., Kahai, S. S. and Baker, B., 2014. E-leadership: Re-examining transformations in leadership source and transmission. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 25(1), 105-131.
- Barley, S. R., 1986. Technology as an occasion for structuring: Evidence from observations of CT scanners and the social order of radiology departments. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 31(1), 78-108.
- Barley, S. R., 1990. The alignment of technology and structure through roles and networks. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 35(1), 61-103.
- Barley, S. R., 2015. Why the internet makes buying a car less loathsome: How technologies change role relations. *Academy of Management Discoveries*, 1(1), 5-35.
- Barley, S. R. and Kunda, G., 2001. Bringing work back in. *Organization Science*, 12(1), 76-95.
- Biddle, B.J., 1979. *Role theory : expectations, identities, and behaviors*. New York: Academic Press.
- Biddle, B. J., 1986. Recent developments in role theory. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 12(1), 67-92.

Björkman, I., Ehrnrooth, M., Smale, A., and John, S., 2011. The determinants of line management internalisation of HRM practices in MNC subsidiaries. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 22(8), 1654-1671.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V., 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V., 2012. Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, and K. J. Sher, eds., *APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology. Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological*. Vol. 2. Washington: American Psychological Association, 57-71.

Cascio, W. F. and Montealegre, R., 2016. How technology is changing work and organizations. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 3(1), 349-375.

Cascón-Pereira, R. and Valverde, M., 2014. HRM devolution to middle managers: Dimension identification. *BRQ Business Research Quarterly*, 17(3), 149-160.

Colbert, A., Yee, N. and George, G., 2016. The digital workforce and the workplace of the future. *Academy of Management Journal*, 59(3), 731-739.

Cortellazzo, L., Bruni, E. and Zampieri, R., 2019. The role of leadership in a digitalized world: a review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10(Aug), 1938.

Dutton, J. E. and Ashford, S. J., 1993. Selling issues to top management. *Academy of Management Review*, 18(3), 397-428.

Eriksson, P. and Kovalainen, A., 2008. *Introducing qualitative methods: Qualitative methods in business research*. London: SAGE Publications.

Evans, S., 2015. Juggling on the line. *Employee Relations*, 37(4), 459-474.

Evans, S., 2017. HRM and front line managers: The influence of role stress. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 28(22), 3128-3148.



Gilbert, C., De Winne, S. and Sels, L., 2011. The influence of line managers and HR department on employees' affective commitment. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 22(8), 1618-1637.

Greve, C., 2015. Ideas in public management reform for the 2010s. Digitalization, value creation and involvement. *Public Organization Review*, 15(1), 49-65.

Hales, C., 2005. Rooted in supervision, branching into management: Continuity and change in the role of first-line manager. *Journal of Management Studies*, 42(3), 471-506.

Intindola, M., Weisinger, J., Benson, P. and Pittz, T., 2017. The evolution of devolution in HR. *Personnel Review*, 46(8), 1796-1815.

Isari, D., Bissola, R. & Imperatori, B., 2019. HR devolution in the Digital Era: What should we expect?. In R. Bissola and B. Imperatori, eds., 2020. *HRM 4.0 For Human-Centered Organizations*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 41-63.

Kahn, R.L., Wolfe, D.M., Quinn, R.P., Snoek, J.D. and Rosenthal, R.A., 1964. *Organizational stress: Studies in role conflict and ambiguity*. New York: Wiley.

Katz, D. and Kahn, R. L., 1978. *The social psychology of organizations*. New York: Wiley.

Kulik, C. T. and Perry, E. L., 2008. When less is more: The effect of devolution on HR's strategic role and construed image. *Human Resource Management*, 47(3), 541-558.

Larsen, H. H. and Brewster, C., 2003. Line management responsibility for HRM: What is happening in Europe?. *Employee Relations*, 25(3), 228-244.

Leonardi, P. M. and Barley, S. R., 2008. Materiality and change: Challenges to building better theory about technology and organizing. *Information and Organization*, 18(3), 159-176.

Link, K. and Müller, B., 2015. Delegating HR work to the line: Emerging tensions and insights from a paradox perspective. *German Journal of Human Resource Management*, 29(3-4), 280-302.

Mantere, S., 2008. Role expectations and middle manager strategic agency. *Journal of Management Studies*, 45(2), 294-316.

Maxwell, G. A. and Watson, S., 2006. Perspectives on line managers in human resource management: Hilton International's UK hotels. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 17(6), 1152-1170.

McCarthy, A., Darcy, C. and Grady, G. 2010. Work-life balance policy and practice: Understanding line manager attitudes and behaviors. *Human Resource Management Review*, 20(2), 158-167.

Nadel, S.F., 1957. *The theory of social structure*. London: Cohen & West.

Nehles, A. C., van Riemsdijk, M., Kok, I. and Looise, J. K., 2006. Implementing Human Resource Management successfully: A first-line management challenge. *Management Revue*, 17(3), 256-273.

Nik Mat, N.H and Barrett, R., 2015. Understanding the line managers' HRM role expectations: Does size matter?. *Asian Social Science*, 11(16), 118-127.

Nik Mat, N.H. and Zabidi, Z.N., 2017. The devolution of HRM to line managers in Malaysia: Role expectations vs. role taking. *Journal of Engineering and Applied Sciences*, 12(6), 1419-1426).

Op de Beeck, S., Wynen, J. and Hondeghem, A., 2016. HRM implementation by line managers: Explaining the discrepancy in HR-line perceptions of HR devolution. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 27(17), 1901-1919.

Orlikowski, W. J. and Scott, S. V., 2008. Sociomateriality: Challenging the separation of technology, work and organization. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 2(1), 433-474.

Orlikowski, W. J., 2009. The sociomateriality of organisational life: considering technology in management research. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 34(1), 125-141.

Pors, A. S., 2015. Becoming digital—passages to service in the digitized bureaucracy. *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, 4(2), 177-192.

Purcell, J. & Hutchinson, S., 2007. Front-line managers as agents in the HRM-performance causal chain: theory, analysis and evidence. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 17(1), 3-20.

Renwick, D., 2003. Line manager involvement in HRM: an inside view. *Employee Relations*, 25(3), 262-280.

Schwarz Müller, T., Brosi, P., Duman, D. and Welp, I. M., 2018. How does the digital transformation affect organizations? Key themes of change in work design and leadership. *Management Review*, 29(2), 114-138.

Sikora, D. M. and Ferris, G. R., 2014. Strategic human resource practice implementation: The critical role of line management. *Human Resource Management Review*, 24(3), 271-281.

Sumelius, J., Vuorenmaa, H., Gartner, J., and Mäkelä, K. The disconnection of work from time, place and employment: Implications for HRM research and practice. Forthcoming.

Tyskbo, D., 2020. Line management involvement in performance appraisal work: Toward a practice-based understanding. *Employee Relations*, 42(3), 818-844.

Walker, B. and Hamilton, R. T., 2011. Employee—employer grievances: A review. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 13(1), 40-58.

Whittaker, S. and Marchington, M., 2003. Devolving HR responsibility to the line: Threat, opportunity or partnership?. *Employee Relations*, 25(3), 245-261.

Wickham, M. D., and Parker, M. 2007. Reconceptualising organisational role theory for contemporary organisational contexts. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 22(5), 440-464.

Wikipedia, 2019. *Digitization* [online] Available at: <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digitization>> [Accessed 30.11.2019]

Williams, P., 2019. Support for supervisors: HR enabling flexible work. *Employee Relations*, 41(5), 914-930.

World Economic Forum, 2018. *The future of jobs 2018*. Geneve: World Economic Forum.

Zammuto, R. F., Griffith, T. L., Majchrzak, A., Dougherty, D. J. and Faraj, S., 2007. Information technology and the changing fabric of organization. *Organization Science*, 18(5), 749-762.

